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Enchanted Ever After

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Author's Note

The first Enchanted, Inc., book was published in 2005, and although there are no precise date stamps in that book or elsewhere in the series, that's when I mentally set the book. I worked out the timeline for events in that book on a calendar for that year because when I was writing it in the fall of 2003, I figured that was the year it was most likely to end up being published. I stuck to that timeline for the rest of the books.

But that means that time passes more slowly in that universe. The characters haven't quite made it through two years while we've lived more than a decade. This book takes place in the spring of 2007. I've tried to keep technology, pop culture references, and events consistent with that time. That's why no one has smart phones (the first iPhone wasn't released until June of 2007, soon after the end of this story) or tablets, and cell phone video cameras weren't quite as ubiquitous as they are now. Social media was just getting started, and blogs were still a big thing. This may not seem like a big difference, but it does affect the story.

I'd gone on a lot of serious magical missions in the past couple of years. I'd fought battles, searched for spies, confronted the powers that be, and gone undercover in the magical mafia. But none of that had made me as tense as what I faced now: buying a wedding dress.

For one thing, spending as much money for one dress that had extremely limited use as I might for my entire wardrobe for a couple of years was an affront to my practical nature. "I don't know why we need to do this," I grumbled in between sips of coffee. "I already have my mother's dress."

My friend Gemma placed a hand on my shoulder. "Oh, honey, I'm no friend to you if I let you wear that. Trust me, you'll find something you love here, something that wasn't outdated when your mother wore it, and you'll be able to afford it. Prices at these sample closeout sales are around seventy-five percent off retail."

"That's not that big a bargain," I said. "I've seen those retail prices."

I had to admit that I wasn't crazy about wearing my mother's wedding dress. I was just less crazy about paying a year's worth of rent for a gown that was only good for one thing. Even if I had second thoughts about my mother's dress, it was too close to the wedding for me to order anything else. A sale like this was my last chance to wear something that didn't look like Scarlett O'Hara's worst nightmare because I could take the dress home today.

When Gemma, who works in fashion, told me about this sale, she'd said it was a secret, the kind of thing you had to know someone who knew someone to even be aware of. Apparently, there were a lot of people who knew someone, and they all had a lot of friends who needed designer wedding gowns at steeply discounted prices. And so, I waited with at least five hundred other women on a sidewalk in the garment district before dawn on a Saturday morning.

I supposed this expedition was kind of fun. I was with my friends—not just Gemma, but also my other roommates, Marcia and Nita, as well as my college friend Connie, and my friends from work, Isabel and Trix. We had flasks of coffee and a box of doughnuts, and it was like a slumber party, only instead of staying up late, we got up really early.

Gemma was in charge of the operation, and as the time drew near for the warehouse to open, she drilled us in the battle plan. "Okay, we're in a good position here. We may not be at the head of the line, but we're close enough that we should still have a chance at the good

dressess. Not everyone here will find something they want to buy, and they won't all want the same thing as Katie. When they open the doors, there may be a bit of a stampede, so be ready to move with the flow of the crowd, and try not to let anyone behind you pass. Isabel, I want you to block and clear the way for the rest of us."

Isabel stretched her arms and cracked her knuckles. "Don't worry, I've got you," she said with a ferocious grin. I was fairly certain that Isabel was part giant. She could probably have carried us all in, tucked under her arms like footballs. I pitied anyone who got in her way.

Gemma continued outlining her game plan. "Once we're in, we'll split up to cover more ground." She handed out diagrams of the warehouse. "I got some inside scoop on how they've got it laid out, so here are your quadrants. Katie and I will float, based on what you've found."

She handed out pages full of photos of wedding dresses. "Here are our targets. If you see something like any of these, pull it and signal. Ignore anything outside these parameters."

"Nothing with too much lace or too poofy, but also nothing super-tight," I instructed. "Y'all know me, so you probably know what I like."

"When in doubt, simple and elegant," Gemma added. "Fortunately, Katie is a pretty average size, so the samples should fit okay with some alteration. We're prepared to do some quick try-ons on the floor, and we'll only battle for dressing rooms for those that make the final cut." Per Gemma's instructions, I wore leggings and a tank top under my coat, so I could try on dresses over my clothes without having to go to a fitting room. I still wasn't sure how well that would work, but Gemma generally knew what she was talking about when it came to clothes and shopping, so I'd put myself in her capable hands.

Gemma checked her watch. "Brace yourselves. The doors should be opening at any minute. Everyone knows their assignment? Then, huddle up."

We grouped in a circle, putting our fists together. "Wedding!" we shouted before breaking the huddle and lining up in formation behind Isabel.

This still seemed a little excessive for buying a dress, I thought. I wondered what Owen would say about eloping. Actually, he'd probably be all for it if it didn't require him to stand up in front of people. We'd even discussed it, but had realized that too many people we cared about would be hurt if we cut them entirely out of our wedding.

Instead, we were planning two weddings. The legal ceremony would be here in New York, a magical (literally!) event at the Magic,

Spells, and Illusions, Inc., headquarters. We were telling our nonmagical friends who weren't in on the secret of magic that we were just getting the legal marriage at City Hall. A few weeks later, we were having an unofficial "blessing" ceremony at my family's church back home in Texas. There were too many people in my family who were immune to magic, like I was, but not in on the secret, so they'd notice anything magical going on. Having a "normal" wedding with them in addition to a magical wedding allowed us to accommodate both sides of our lives. It meant a lot of planning, but, on the bright side, I'd get to wear my wedding dress more than once.

There was a stirring ahead in the line, and I got ready, feeling like I was waiting for the starter's pistol to go off for a race. The crowd surged forward, and I kept close to Isabel's back as the people behind us pressed against me. Then we were off, running down the sidewalk and squeezing through the still-opening doors.

After making it inside, I found myself in perhaps the least romantic setting for choosing a wedding gown: an old brick warehouse lit by industrial fluorescent lights hanging on chains from the high ceiling. The floor was filled with rows of garment racks bursting with clouds of white. I couldn't imagine how anyone would find anything in this place.

But that's what our scout team was for. The others went out looking for dresses, and my job was to go to them and evaluate what they found. I clung to Gemma's arm so we wouldn't get separated in the melee.

And melee it was. All these hundreds of women took their wedding dress shopping very seriously, letting nothing get in their way as they attacked the racks. I wouldn't have been surprised if there were fistfights before this was done. There seemed to be thousands of dresses here, surely enough for everyone in line. The trick was finding the right one and hoping that a dozen other people hadn't already claimed it.

"Katie! Over here!" Nita called out, and Gemma and I hurried over.

Nita had two dresses off the rack. Gemma glanced at one and said, "Nope," then looked at the other and said, "Let's see."

I shrugged off my coat, feeling rather exposed in my skimpy clothes, and Gemma and Nita helped me into the dress. It was just a bit too big, but Gemma had clips in her bag to make it fit properly. I wished I could see myself, but there weren't any mirrors nearby. I'd have to rely on Gemma's judgment. She studied me for a moment, then shook her head. "Nope."

I glanced down at myself. "I think it would be okay."

"Never go with the first one."

Connie called out from nearby, and Gemma and Nita helped me

out of the dress so we could go look at her finds. And then there were more dresses to look at. I wasn't sure how many I tried on or how long we'd been in the warehouse. Time seemed to have come to a standstill. I existed in a sea of white, cream, and ivory, with no end and no beginning. The dresses somehow all looked the same to me, even when they were vastly different. Gemma had passed three dresses on for final consideration, and we were still searching. I'd given up on having an opinion at this point. I just did as I was told and went with the flow. I figured I'd get my input in the final selection.

As Gemma and I rushed over to Isabel, who held a dress out of reach of someone else who was trying to get it, I heard raised voices nearby—women fighting over a dress.

"I got here first," one voice said.

"Oh, I don't think so. I had my hand on it before you did," said the other voice.

Gemma got my attention back with a hand on my arm. "Stay above the fray," she said.

She approved of the dress Isabel had picked out and added it to the stash, which was getting heavy enough that she drafted Isabel as our pack mule to carry the dresses for final evaluation. She could carry the weight and keep them all out of anyone else's reach.

As we hurried toward Nita's signal, another argument broke out, but this time, the dress in dispute vanished from the hands of the woman who held it and reappeared in another woman's arms. "Sorry, I got to it first," the second woman said smugly.

Using magic seemed to me like cheating. I hoped my magical friends weren't employing their powers, especially since Nita and Connie weren't in on the secret and I didn't want to have to explain that Trix was a fairy and Isabel was a wizard. I wondered how many magical people might be here. Wizards and other magical creatures getting into fights over wedding gowns could get really ugly.

And, of course, by merely thinking that I seemed to have jinxed the situation. Another gown vanished from someone's hands, only she apparently knew what was going on. "Hey!" she shouted, and summoned the gown back to herself.

"Okay, let's see what you've got for me," I said perhaps a bit too loudly, in hopes of distracting Nita from the magical activity. She and Gemma got the dress on me, and both of them grinned.

"This may be the one," Gemma said.

"It's so you," Nita agreed.

Just then, something bright whizzed overhead. I instinctively ducked, trying not to let the gown drag on the floor when I crouched. I felt the familiar tingle that told me magic was in use nearby. A

glance upward showed fireballs flying back and forth, but the view was obscured through a haze. Isabel must have put up a shield to protect us.

“Are they shooting?” Nita asked, flinching as a fireball shot overhead.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It doesn’t sound like gunfire. I think maybe someone’s camera flash just went haywire.” It was a flimsy excuse, but she didn’t question it, probably because “magical battle” wasn’t top of mind as a possibility for her.

“I think we have enough to try on,” Gemma said. “Isabel, can you get us to the changing rooms?”

I was grateful to get away from the mayhem—and more important, get Nita away from it before she realized what was going on. By hanging out with me, she was probably eventually going to figure out the magical stuff, but there were strict rules about what we could and couldn’t tell or show outsiders. When and if that time came, I wanted it to be less of a crazy situation than this. It had been bad enough that Gemma and Marcia had learned the secret when an evil wizard kidnapped Marcia.

There was a long line at the curtained alcove that served as a fitting room, but at least it was away from the action. Some bright pops of light came from the middle of the warehouse floor, but it was easier to distract Nita when fireballs weren’t flying directly over her head.

“So, you like this one?” I said, gesturing at the dress I still wore. I couldn’t see much past a wide collar.

“Yeah. I think it’s you. Not too many flounces or bows, but it’s still romantic. Very fairytale, kind of like Aurora in the cartoon, but in white, and without the sleeves. And so much better than that thing your mom sent.”

My feeble efforts at distraction were nothing against the chaos that was unfolding in the middle of the sale, and soon Nita’s attention strayed to where an all-out magical battle was in full swing. “What is going on out there?” she asked. “They take their wedding dress shopping seriously around here.”

“I’d heard wild stories about these sample sales, but I didn’t know they were this wild,” I said. We were well past the point where I could safely deny seeing anything odd and make her think she was imagining things. Now my best hope was to acknowledge the weirdness and act as stunned as she was while I scrambled for a reasonable explanation.

People were fleeing the scene, some still clinging to or wearing wedding dresses, much to the dismay of the sales staff. The security guards at the entrances and exits had left their posts to try to break up

the fight, so no one was there to stop people from leaving without paying.

The rest of my friends joined us, and when I saw Trix, I said, loudly enough for her to hear and hoping she'd catch my drift, "I wonder if anyone has called the police. Someone could get hurt."

She frowned, glanced back at the fight, then nodded in acknowledgment before drifting away to a corner where she could make a call without being overheard. If magic was being used openly, that made it a matter for the magical authorities, and it was somewhat within my jurisdiction as a member of the security staff for MSI. Technically, the magical Council should have handled this sort of thing, but they only tended to get involved when the situation got political, so we usually dealt with these kinds of events on our own, with the weak excuse that any miscreants were probably using our spells, and doing so openly in front of nonmagical people violated the user agreement.

In spite of the chaos among the racks, the fitting room line kept moving as though nothing was happening. I guess getting a designer wedding gown for a fraction of the price was a big enough deal to make anyone tolerate a little mayhem. "Sample sales always get a little crazy," Gemma remarked. "You should see what it's like when it's shoes. I remember one time when they had to call in at least three ambulances and police in riot gear."

Finally, we were admitted to the fitting room, which was really just one big space with mirrors along the curtained walls. I was already wearing the dress, and I had to agree with the others' assessment: This might be it. "Okay, this one will do," I said.

Gemma's eyebrows shot up so quickly I was surprised they stayed on her face. "It'll do? You want a wedding dress that will do? Uh uh, you've got to at least look at the others on. You want to be in love with a wedding dress, not figuring it'll do."

Her eyes tracked back to the exit, and I realized she was giving me an excuse to keep Nita and Connie in the fitting area until someone could deal with the public use of magic. I supposed there were sacrifices to be made in the name of keeping the secret, so I let Gemma unclip the dress and help me out of it, then tried on each of the others.

The more I saw of myself in wedding gowns, the more it struck me that I really was getting married. I didn't have cold feet at all. I knew I wanted to marry Owen. It was just that the wedding itself had seemed like some kind of far-off fantasy, but now here I was wearing white dresses and trying to picture Owen's face when he saw me walking down the aisle in each of them. I still found it a little hard to believe that a handsome, powerful wizard wanted to marry a super-ordinary

woman like me. At some point, I was bound to wake up and realize that the past year and a half had all been a dream.

"Any thoughts?" Gemma asked as I stepped out of another dress and handed it over to Marcia to put it back on its hanger.

"I'm still leaning toward that first one."

There were screams from outside, and everyone turned to listen for a moment before going back to trying on dresses. Then there was silence. I didn't hear the kind of shouting that likely would have come with the real cops. No one told everyone to freeze and put their hands up, or anything like that. It was more like all the combatants had suddenly decided they were done fighting.

The vote among my friends was unanimous on behalf of the dress I'd liked, so I held on to that one and my friends headed out to return the others to the racks. When I emerged from the fitting room, everything seemed pretty calm. There were no voices raised, no fireballs being flung. I spotted a gargoyle sitting in the rafters and felt a hint of magic, so I suspected there had been some magical help in calming things down. People hadn't just suddenly become reasonable on their own.

While I waited for the register, the woman in line behind me said, "You did notice all that, didn't you?"

"You mean the scuffle?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't say, "No, the gargoyles who stopped the fight." Then again, we were always on the lookout for magical immunes, so I'd know we'd found a good candidate if she saw it all and was still reasonably calm.

"Yeah. I've seen fights at sales like this, and they didn't get this crazy."

"Well, wedding gowns are expensive, so there's more incentive to do whatever it takes to grab the one you want."

"But they didn't have to use their hands to grab. I swear, one time the gown literally flew from one person to the other. Another time, it just poofed away and then reappeared. Like magic."

"Magic?" I said, trying to pour as much disbelief as possible into my voice. It took all my acting ability, since I was so steeped in magic. I'd even briefly had magical powers. At the same time, I felt bad for trying to make her think that something she'd seen for herself wasn't real, when I knew it was.

"I don't know what else to call it. And it's not the first time I've seen something like that."

Now she really had my attention. She wasn't just speculating based on this event. "Oh?" I said.

She leaned in closer and whispered. "Yes. This kind of thing goes on all the time in this city, but no one ever talks about it. I think a lot of it has to do with how focused New Yorkers are on their own

business. They either don't see crazy stuff at all or they pretend not to see it so no one thinks they're a tourist. But then I also think there's someone cleaning it all up so there won't be any evidence."

I would have thought she was a crazy conspiracy theorist if I hadn't known she was absolutely right. "Clean it up?" I asked, curious about what she'd noticed.

"Like this." She gestured with the arm that didn't have a wedding gown draped over it. "One minute, there's a magical war raging out there. Next thing you know, all is calm, like it never happened. I bet most of the other people who weren't involved in the fight have already convinced themselves that it's just wacky sample sale hijinks."

I noticed that she hadn't mentioned gargoyles swooping down with magical happy dust to make the combatants forget their fight. That was good. "Maybe they just got a dose of perspective," I said with a shrug. "You've got to admit, it is kind of silly to get that worked up over a wedding dress."

"Have you looked at the prices?"

Only then did it occur to me that I'd selected a dress without even looking at the price tag. I really had been distracted. Screwing up my courage, I found the tag. The manufacturer's suggested price nearly gave me a heart attack. It wasn't much lower than my annual salary when I'd been working for my family's business. That price had been marked through, and several more prices below that were marked through. There was a final number written in red that I still thought was too much to pay for a single dress, but that was better than I'd expected after reading all the bridal magazines Gemma had dumped on me, and I had to admit that this dress was much better than what I'd planned to wear. "Okay, maybe that is worth blacking someone's eye for," I admitted. "I'm lucky no one else wanted this dress and tried to take it away from me."

"And you're really lucky it wasn't some person with magical powers who wanted it," she said, her voice grim. She reached into the outer pocket of her purse and brought out a business card, which she handed to me. "Here, if you're interested in tracking this sort of thing, check out this blog. We're putting together a body of evidence to prove magic's real, and maybe soon we'll have enough to get someone's attention."

"Do you really think it's that dangerous?" I asked. Visions of the witch trials we'd studied in history class danced through my head, making my stomach clench. The idea took on a whole new meaning now that I had so many friends who might be affected by a real witch hunt.

"Someone could have been seriously hurt out there. Plus, if people have magical powers, it gives them all kinds of unfair advantages.

They can break the laws of physics, so it's not even like someone being smarter or more athletic than others. It's on a whole different level. Think about it."

I had no idea how to respond to that. I wasn't comfortable stating that magic wasn't real, since that was a lie, but defending magic would mean admitting I knew it was real, and that was strictly forbidden. My friends joined me once their mission was complete, saving me from having to answer. There was too much chatter from them for me to interact with the random woman in line.

Soon afterward, I reached the register where, much to my surprise, the final price rang up at another thirty percent off the lowest price on the tag. "Wow!" I exclaimed. That was good enough that I didn't even freak out when handing over my credit card.

"See, I told you there were good deals here," Gemma said. "But don't you dare tell Owen what you paid for the wedding gown. Leave that much a mystery."

"Can I tell my mother?" I hated to get this kind of bargain without getting to gloat over it with someone who'd appreciate it.

"Yeah, tell your mother. The discount might be enough to make up for any disappointment about you not wearing her dress."

In all the excitement about my great deal, I completely forgot about the woman I'd been talking to. I put her card in my purse when I got out my credit card and didn't give her another thought.

We wrestled the bulky garment bag home on the subway, and when we got back to our apartment, I tried the dress on again with more appropriate undergarments—though Gemma said I'd want to buy all new things for the occasion, even if I did already have a strapless bra that would work. The gown looked even better when not worn over leggings and a tank top. "Now, aren't you glad you listened to me?" Gemma asked.

"Yes," I said, not even grudgingly. This gown was so much more "me" than my mother's dress was, and it was a lot more comfortable, with no itchy lace.

I was still wearing the dress when the intercom buzzed from the front door downstairs. "Hey, it's Owen," a scratchy voice said over the speaker.

All of us squealed, and I ran for my bedroom, Gemma and Nita at my heels. I heard Marcia say, "You're going to have to wait a moment."

Gemma and Nita helped me out of the dress, and while they put it back in its bag and hung it in the closet, I hurried to put on jeans and a sweater. By the time my friends had buzzed Owen through the front door and he'd made it up the stairs to our place, all signs of wedding gown shopping were gone, and I thought I looked reasonably nice—

ordinary nice, not princess in a white dress nice.

I greeted him at the door with a kiss. "I'm assuming things went well, if you had to stall me," he said.

"We're not telling," Gemma said firmly.

"I don't think you'd have made me wait to come up if you didn't have something to hide," he said, grinning.

"Yes, the expedition was a success, and no, I'm not giving you any hints," I said.

"Buying it was a bit of an adventure," Nita said.

Owen flinched ever so slightly before saying, "Oh, really?" and I realized why he'd chosen now to drop by. He wasn't curious about the dress. He was making sure we were okay. I wondered which of my winged colleagues had tipped him off.

"You know, New York sample sales," Gemma said with a shrug. "Anyone want coffee? I'm starting to feel like I got up before four, so I think I'll make a pot."

"Whose idea was it to get up that early?" I teased. "And, yeah, I could do with a cup."

"As long as you're making it . . ." Owen said.

Nita yawned. "Me, too."

"I think I'll just head home and get a nap," Connie said. "My husband made plans for the evening."

Trix, Isabel, and Marcia chimed in for coffee, and Gemma went to work in the kitchen. Nita picked up the TV remote and began flipping through channels. "I wish I had time for a nap," she said, "but the coffee is going to have to do. I have the day shift today, so it may be a struggle if it's boring."

I didn't pay much attention to her channel surfing until she shouted, "Hey, this is where we were!"

I turned to see a breaking news report about what they were calling a riot at a wedding dress sample sale. "It really wasn't that bad," I said. "More of a scuffle than a riot."

"It's crazier than anything I've ever seen," Nita said, turning up the volume.

On the screen, a reporter stood in front of the warehouse, describing the event witnesses reported. She turned to interview a woman standing next to her—the woman who'd been in line with me.

"I'd say they were definitely using magic," the woman said.

Owen and I glanced at each other, and he winced. On the television, the reporter said, "Magic?" Her tone made it clear she thought the woman was a crackpot.

"Yes, magic," the woman said firmly. "I can't think of any other explanation, and I've tried. Dresses were disappearing out of people's hands and appearing in other people's hands. You can do sleight of hand with a coin, but with a wedding dress? You can't exactly stick one of those up your sleeve. I also saw dresses being levitated, and once people were fighting over the dresses, they started throwing fireballs and what seemed to be spells at each other."

"Interesting," the reporter said with a nod, but with an expression that said, "Get me away from this lunatic."

"Yes, and then they suppressed the whole thing, like it never happened."

"Okay, someone is off her meds," Nita said. "I didn't notice any of that stuff. There was just some really rapid tug-of-war going on. I mean, yeah, it was crazy, but hocus-pocus? Really?"

Marcia developed a coughing fit, and Trix bit her lip while turning red, so I got the impression she was stifling giggles. "Well, it is New York," Isabel said with a shrug. "It takes all kinds, and that's not the craziest thing that reporter will hear all day."

"I don't know, maybe there was some magic involved," I said. "That's the only explanation for the price I got."

"Katie!" Gemma said. "I thought we agreed."

"Oh, come on, you can't expect me to get that kind of deal and not talk about it. Owen will be impressed that I got a bargain, right?"

"It was a good bargain?" he asked.

"They practically paid me to take it."

"And it's gorgeous," Nita added, now distracted from the news story—as had been my plan. "No details, but I think you'll love it."

"Now we just need to tend to the million and a half other items on the agenda," I said.

I normally liked having Nita around. She'd been my best friend since elementary school and had moved to New York the previous summer. But I really wanted to discuss the morning's magical events with Owen and the others, so I couldn't wait for her to finish her coffee and head to her job at a Manhattan hotel. It would have been so much easier if they'd let me bring her in on the truth, but my requests had been decisively shot down by my superiors at the company. They were that paranoid about keeping magic a secret.

When Nita was gone, I said, "I should look into that woman from the sale."

"Did you catch her name?" Trix asked. "Maybe they'll rerun the story in the next half hour and we can see it then."

"No need," I said, remembering my encounter with her. "I got her card. At least, I think I still have it." I went to get my purse.

"Wow, a month on the security team, and you're already that much on the ball?" Owen teased.

"She was in line behind me at the register, saying pretty much the same stuff she said on TV." I rummaged in my purse until I found the card. "Ah, here it is. She said she writes for a blog that tracks magical incidents." I handed the card to Owen. "Does this ring a bell?"

He glanced at it, shrugged, and handed it back to me. "Haven't heard of it, but that's not really my department. Is she a magical immune?"

"I don't think so. She talked about everyone suddenly calming down, but she didn't mention the gargoyles swooping in, so I'm guessing their veiling spell worked on her. No, she's just perceptive and has an open mind, so she notices things and is willing to believe her own eyes."

"That's a dangerous combination for us," Isabel said.

"And now that she's started noticing things, she's looking for them, which makes her even more likely to see magic," I added.

"If she starts talking about these things, then other people may begin noticing them, too," Trix said. "That's the real problem. If people start believing in magic, then they'll see it everywhere. They only don't notice a lot of it because they know it's not possible."

"Would that be so bad?" Marcia asked. "Then you wouldn't have to hide what you are."

"Easy to say when you don't have wings," Trix said with a shudder. "But I can see my people being dissected."

"She didn't exactly sound pro magic," I said. "She thought it was an unfair advantage to be able to break the laws of physics. I could see her as the type to campaign for restrictions on magical people."

"So I guess you'd better put a stop to this, fast," Gemma said, "before they start burning your people for witchcraft."

"They burned heretics," Owen said. "Witches were more likely to be hanged or suffocated. Unless they were also heretics, I guess. But this isn't anything to get too excited about."

"Says the person unlikely to be dissected," Trix said.

"Believe it or not, this happens all the time," Owen said. "We try to keep magic under wraps, but it's impossible to keep it completely hidden, and yet it's still a secret after all this time. You need a critical mass of people believing in the possibility of magic before anyone

talking about magic can get any traction, and there's much less belief these days."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked, studying the card. "She talked like her blog has a following, with people sending in reports. Maybe I should cross-reference to see whether or not their reports are valid and look into how credible these people seem. Just in case."

"Sounds like you're really taking to this security thing," Owen said, draping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me against him in a hug.

"Are you surprised?" I asked.

"Not in the least." He gave me a quick kiss on the temple. "And now there's a place I thought we might investigate for lunch. We can be on the lookout for any magical activity."

"Oh, yes, I think we need to do that," I said. "And then I'm going to need a nap."

Gemma ran out of the living room and returned with a binder. "While you're having lunch, don't forget to go over your timeline and checklist. I think we're on target, but you'll want to see what your next action items are."

As we headed down the stairs, I said, "It's still not too late to elope."

"Hey, maybe if this magic exposure thing turns out to be an actual threat, we'll have the excuse of being too busy to plan a real wedding," he said.

"We can only hope," I replied, hefting the binder.

I didn't put much thought into the bridal brawl for the rest of the weekend. Planning a wedding—two weddings—had a way of eclipsing all other potential distractions. There was very little short of a direct nuclear strike on the city that would have forced me to lose focus on my epic to-do list. Only when I got to my desk Monday morning did I recall my mental note to look into that blog. I took the business card from my purse and typed the address into my browser.

The blog was on a blogging service rather than on a site with its own domain name, and it was obviously done on a ready-made template. Whoever was behind it wasn't investing any money in the crusade. I scrolled through the past week or so of posts. The incidents reported wouldn't have sounded too convincing if I hadn't known that there was a good chance they were real. The contributors wrote of people and objects disappearing into thin air, people feeling strange compulsions to do things they otherwise wouldn't have wanted to do, and odd phenomena, like bursts of light. Even a desperate tabloid reporter would probably hang up on callers reporting this sort of event, but I knew they were all things that really did happen.

Some of the posts were accompanied by alleged photographic

evidence, but it wasn't particularly convincing. These photos were even less clear than most pictures that supposedly showed Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. All they proved was that the blogger was honest enough not to doctor the photos.

I didn't have time to dig any further before it was time for the weekly staff meeting. I used to dread Monday-morning meetings, but since I'd joined the MSI security team, they were a lot more interesting, like something out of a cop show. They were more a briefing on ongoing cases than the litany of urgent tasks as everyone tried to prove how busy and valuable they were that I'd experienced in most of my previous jobs.

It was sometimes a little disconcerting being one of two people in the conference room actually sitting in chairs instead of perching on the backs or arms. Most of the security team members were gargoyles, since their role from medieval times of watching over churches translated into watching over the company and the magical world. The only other human in this particular meeting was Trish, another magical immune I'd met and recruited during my recent undercover work. She was a military veteran and probably more qualified for this job than I was, but she was new to the magical world.

Sam, the gargoyle head of security, ran the meeting. He began with a briefing on current concerns, which included the fight his team had broken up Saturday morning. "The Council enforcers got there after we got things settled down, and they're dealin' with the participants," he reported. "One of our employees was involved, and she's under disciplinary review."

"I've got a little more to add, from my perspective on the scene," I said.

"Yeah, doll, whattaya got?"

"Well, for one thing, the magic was noticed, and not by an immune." I told them about the conversation I'd had with the woman in line. "And she said the same thing on the news. The reporter treated her like a nutjob. She's got a blog tracking magical activity, and it sounds to me like the reports might be real, even if they don't sound all that credible. I can dig into it further, if you like."

"No point. It probably won't amount to much," Sam said, shrugging his wings. "We get these every so often. We can't pull the wool over absolutely everyone's eyes. Fortunately, the general public isn't likely to believe these folks. It's mostly just the sort of people who believe what they read in supermarket tabloids. No one's ever come up with enough credible evidence to convince anyone outside the fringe. I'd rather have you focusing on finishing up the analysis of employees who might have had links to the Collegium." That had been my last case, busting up the magical mafia that seemed to have

tentacles throughout the magical world, and I had to admit that it was probably more important than one person with a blog.

As the meeting broke up and we headed back to our offices, Trish asked, "Should we worry? I mean, just imagine how it would change the world if everyone knew magic was real."

"Well, they have managed to keep the secret all this time," I said, repeating what Owen had told me. "It may get more challenging now that a lot of cell phones have cameras in them, and there are video cameras you can carry in your pocket. That makes getting evidence easier, though magic apparently doesn't photograph well. Let's just say that their 'evidence' isn't very convincing, even when you know it's true."

Even so, I couldn't resist pulling up the security logs and checking them against the blog. A lot of the incidents matched, so these people were reporting things that really had happened. I checked the readership statistics, and it didn't look like more than a few hundred people had visited this blog—if that. The same few people might have visited over and over again. Maybe Sam was right. It was probably only a small fringe crowd, nothing to get excited about. Still, I thought it wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on it and to learn more about the woman running it all.

The woman's business card gave her name as Abigail Williams, which rang a bell, but I couldn't quite place it.

"What did you come up with?"

I turned to see Trish leaning against the door frame, a coffee cup in her hand. "About what?" I asked, trying to act innocent.

"Oh, come on, I haven't known you long, but I know you. You had to do just a little more digging. What did you find?"

"They've noticed legitimate stuff, so I may keep an eye on them to see if anyone's listening. The woman's business card said her name was Abigail Williams, and I don't know if that's real."

She laughed. "Abigail Williams? Seriously? Yeah, that's not ominous at all." When I didn't react as though I knew what she meant, she explained. "That's one of the accusers in the Salem witch trials." She gave a bashful little smile. "I was in a production of *The Crucible* in high school. My deep, dark secret is that I was a drama nerd."

"So, probably not her real name."

"Not unless her parents just happened to like the name Abigail and weren't into history or drama, and she just happened to become some kind of crusader to expose magic. Or maybe the name was deliberate and her parents gave her a nice puritan upbringing that led her to where she is today. But I'm guessing it's a pen name. Was there any other info on the card?"

"Just an e-mail address. Should I e-mail her?"

“I’d say it’s best not to engage. You’re up to your eyebrows in magic and planning a wedding to a wizard. You don’t want to draw attention to yourself if she’s already looking for magical weirdness.”

“Oh, good point,” I said as a chill went down my back. Anyone watching me for more than about five minutes was bound to notice magical activity if they were paying attention. I may be so utterly immune to magic that magic doesn’t work on me, but I somehow manage to be a magical trouble magnet. All I have to do is stand there, and you can bet that magical hijinks will soon ensue.

Okay, maybe some of that has to do with my job. Even before I officially became a part of the security team, I did my fair share of looking into magical malfeasance. Then there’s the fact that I hang out with—and am engaged to—Owen Palmer, who’s one of the most powerful wizards of his generation. That put a target on his back even before it was revealed that his parents had been the previous generation’s bad guys who tried to take over the magical world. They died soon after he was born, so it’s not like they were a big influence on him, but there are people who worry about his genetics.

And that meant drawing the attention of this Abigail Williams person would probably be a bad idea. I bookmarked the blog and added it to my list to check regularly. I’d once tried to set up search alerts for key words that were likely to come up if someone started talking about magic online, but that turned out to be a lost cause. I got bombarded with news about fantasy novels, a pro basketball team, Disney movies and theme parks, and various Wiccan practices. Maybe there were some sites from magic watchers buried in all those results, but I hadn’t found them before.

I tried clicking through to see if any of the frequent posters on this site were active elsewhere. A couple had their own blogs, but they were mostly full of pictures of their cats or diary-like discussions of their daily lives, with no mention of magic. I also tried running searches on terms these people used to describe magical events. That led me to a few other magic-watching blogs, which I bookmarked.

Then I had to get to work on my real assignment. I checked the list of people I was supposed to investigate and visited their offices to look for anything suspicious enough to warrant further investigation. I’d have felt a lot creepier about monitoring coworkers that way if I hadn’t seen how bad the Collegium was and if I hadn’t uncovered evidence that a lot of people at MSI had been hired because of their ties to the ancient organization. That didn’t mean all of them had been actively involved. It may have meant little more than someone putting in a good word. We’d dealt with the people we knew had been working against us from within, so now we had to figure out those who fell into a gray area.

Even as I chatted with people and scanned their offices for signs that they were magically hiding contraband, I couldn't stop pondering what both Sam and Owen had said about magic being kept a secret. People today might not be so willing to consider the possibility of magic, but how had they handled it in the past? While I was out and about, I figured I could turn to my usual source for history of the magical world: Owen.

He wasn't a historian, but history was somewhat related to his job. He was in charge of theoretical magic. That meant he tried to figure out how magic worked and how it could be used. He also dug up old spells, tested them, and tried to find ways to apply them. While he didn't care much about the historical events around the spells, he had a lot of old books about magic in his office and lab, and I could usually find what I needed there.

Besides, it was always nice to have a valid excuse to visit my fiancé at work.

I used my security pass to get into the research and development department and found Owen in his lab at the end of the hall. He and his assistant, Jake, were testing a spell. More accurately, Owen was testing a spell on Jake, a young wizard with the looks of Jimmy Olsen and the musical taste of Johnny Rotten. Just as I entered the lab, Jake yelped and leaped about three feet off the ground, twisted violently in the air, and looked like he was about to crash horribly before he stopped a few inches off the ground and descended the rest of the way slowly, landing gently on the floor.

"I don't think that's what that spell was meant to do," he said from his position on the floor, his words slightly slurred.

Owen frowned and studied the whiteboard. "Yeah. I think the copyist may have dripped ink on that rune." He erased one of the words on the board and wrote in a different one. "Let's try it this way."

Still lying on the floor, Jake said, "Mind if we take a break first, boss?"

"I second that motion," I said.

Owen turned around, saw me, grinned, and flushed a delightful shade of pink. "Katie! To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Actually, I'm not here to see you. I'm here to raid your bookshelf. I'm looking for records of any historical incidents that almost exposed magic to the outside world."

"That sounds ominous," Jake said as he sat up and leaned against the leg of the lab table. "What's up?"

I boosted myself up to sit on the edge of the table, letting my legs swing. "Not too much. Just a few blogs by people who sound like crackpots, but who are frighteningly accurate. It doesn't seem like

they're getting much traction yet, but I want to see what wizards did if this sort of thing ever came up before."

"Is Sam worried about it?" Owen asked.

"Not really," I said. "I'm just curious. People keep telling me that the secret's been kept all this time, and I want to know how that happened."

He headed into his office, returning with a massive tome. "This probably covers it. Tell the book what you're looking for, and it'll flip open to that part." He handed the book to me, and the weight almost made me topple off the table.

"I guess this is one I should use here, unless you've got a moving crew and a dolly for me to use to get it down to my office," I said, turning to drop the book on the table. It made a deep "thunk" sound. I hopped down and turned to touch the book. "It'll work for me?"

"The spell is in the book itself, so no magic is required."

"Okay," I said doubtfully. I took a breath and said, "Show me incidents of possible magic discovery." I hoped those search terms worked more accurately for this book than they did on the Internet.

The book opened and its pages rustled until they fell open and lay still. I bent and read a bit. It discussed the paranoia about witches during the 1600s. "Next" I said, as though this was a computer search. That worked on the book, as the pages rustled again, falling open to an item from the Victorian era. "Hmm, apparently not all the lurid penny dreadfuls were fiction," I said. Some of the more shocking tales were true, and the Victorians were big on things like psychic phenomena and spiritualism, so they were open to believing them. Oddly, that helped keep real magic a secret, because there were so many fake mediums for believers to flock to that no one was likely to notice any actual magic buried in all the charlatanism.

"Oh, yeah," Owen said, reading over my shoulder. His breath on my neck was warm, and I had to remind myself that Jake was still in the room. "A lot of the spiritualists and mediums weren't talking to the dead. They were wizards or being used by wizards."

"Next," I said to the book, and it flipped some more. "Wow, there was a wave during the seventies and all the hype about the Bermuda Triangle, Bigfoot, and UFOs." I read on. "No, looks like the Bermuda Triangle, Bigfoot, and UFO stuff was another effort to bury stories about magic. I'm sensing a theme here."

The next section was during the eighties and the panic over Dungeons and Dragons. It seemed that someone had seen real magic and thought it had something to do with the game. Cue hysteria. "The moral of the story is that there's always going to be panic and overreaction, but that's true of everything, not just magic, and that makes it easy to bury magic," I concluded, turning to face Owen.

"I take it this means you believe me about this not being a threat."

"I suppose so," I said with a sigh. "Besides, I have better things to do right now, like plan a wedding."

"I'm glad to hear it. These things always seem to escalate into you taking risks."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You're one to talk about that. As I recall, I wasn't the one turned into a frog." More seriously, I added, "But you're the one who needs to be careful. You've already got elements in the magical world gunning for you. If you did something that got noticed by nonmagical people, you'd make a perfect scapegoat."

"How often do you see me using magic away from work?"

"Around the house, no, but when you do something, you tend to do it big."

He drew an X over his chest with his index finger. "Cross my heart, I'll be good. And speaking of being good, what do you have planned after work?"

"Nothing in particular. Why?"

"I figured we could walk past a couple of florists and look in the windows. That way, we could check something off the to-do list in Gemma's wedding binder."

"I thought the point of having a magical wedding in a magical space was that someone could wave a hand and, poof, instant wedding."

"But we have to decide what we want them to poof. Which is why all we have to do is look in the windows and see what we like."

"Sounds like fun, but I'm not the one who tends to forget time and work late."

He crossed his heart again. "At five on the dot, I promise."

He actually kept his word, much to my surprise. Usually, I had to drop by his lab, he'd realize the time, swear he only needed another half hour to finish whatever experiment he had going, and then I'd give up and go home after an hour. But he was surprisingly into the wedding planning, which I guessed was a good sign.

As we left the office building, he consulted a list. "These are the florists Gemma recommended we look at, but since we don't actually have to order flowers, we could also look at some botanical gardens. That would probably be a weekend excursion, though."

We waited for a "walk" light to cross the street to get to the subway station. This was one of those areas where Owen tended to use magic in public without even thinking about it. He could cross a busy street against the light without getting run over or could change the lights to clear his path. He'd been more cautious about using magic in public ever since the secret of his parentage was revealed.

Considering what he'd gone through then, I thought that was perfectly understandable.

But it wasn't just magical people who ignored traffic signals. Jaywalking was practically an organized athletic activity in this city, and there were always people taking advantage of traffic gridlock to cross streets in between cars backed up at intersections. We were the oddballs actually waiting for a signal while people streamed past us across the street.

While we were still waiting for the light to change, someone coming from the other side of the street darted into traffic, just as a city bus came barreling down the road. The jaywalker didn't seem to notice the bus, and the bus didn't have room to stop in time. I flinched, anticipating the impact as the bus tires squealed.

But there was no impact. The bus levitated, going over the man's head and gently landing before continuing on its way, gradually slowing in time to stop behind the line of cars waiting for the light to change.

And judging by the number of people on the sidewalks pointing and exclaiming, that bit of magic hadn't been hidden from ordinary people.

I gasped in shock along with everyone else. I wasn't astonished by a bus flying because I knew such things were possible. I was just surprised to see it happening out in the open, where everyone could see it. I immediately turned to Owen, who shrugged. "Don't look at me. I didn't do that," he said.

True, I would have sensed the magic if he'd used it so close to me. "But who did?" I asked. We weren't far from MSI headquarters, so there was a good chance a lot of the pedestrians in the area were magical. I would have hoped, though, that anyone working for MSI would know better than to do something that big so publicly, without any kind of veiling spell. It was possible that, in the heat of the moment, all they'd thought about was saving the jaywalker and had forgotten to consider the potential consequences. Still, I'd never known a magical person who wasn't trying to cause trouble to forget about being detected. It was drilled into them from childhood. There were actually children's books about what awful things might happen if you let someone see you use magic. Owen's foster parents had a whole bookshelf full of them.

The light changed, and we could safely—and legally—cross the street. People gathered in the plaza there were discussing the incident, loudly enough that we could hear them. "I swear, that bus just rose into the air," one person said.

As we passed the group, a man turned to us. "Tell me I'm not crazy. Did you see it?"

My conscience kicked in. I couldn't bring myself to lie because it seemed wrong to tell him he hadn't seen what he'd seen. "It all happened so fast, I'm not sure what I saw," I said.

"All I know is, that guy was lucky," Owen added.

"Did anyone get a picture?" someone in the crowd called out.

"Maybe there's security camera footage," someone else said.

We continued on our way to the subway station, trying to walk casually, so we wouldn't look like we were fleeing the scene. We didn't have to discuss it out loud to know what the danger was. Owen in the vicinity of that kind of magic would look suspicious, as powerful as he was. All I could hope was that there was security footage that showed him not doing anything.

On the other hand, at least it wasn't a bad magical working, like using magic to take a bargain wedding gown away from someone else. It had saved a man's life, which was far from evil. The only consequences might be in the magical world, for risking exposure.

Even if people were on the lookout for magic, they shouldn't be able to find fault with that.

I checked the magical watchdog blogs the next morning to see if there was any mention of the incident. Abigail's blog had a couple of reports, one with a photo. Fortunately, the photo was taken from an angle where the bus's wheels weren't visible and must have been shot just before the wheels touched the ground, so the bus didn't look like it was any higher off the ground than normal. If I hadn't seen the incident myself, I wouldn't have been convinced by the picture, whether or not I knew about magic.

There was a call for any bystanders or passengers on the bus to give their firsthand accounts. I knew that if I were investigating the incident, I'd ride that bus around the same time the next day to try to find the regular commuters who were likely to have been on board.

I was pondering whether it would look too obvious for me to do just that when I got a call from Trix. "The boss wants to see you, right away," she said.

That was a little unsettling, especially since I'd just then been pursuing something I'd been told wasn't my assignment, and the boss had a way of knowing what was going on. I used to work directly for the company's chief executive, so we had a good working relationship, but in my current position, I was down the line in the chain of command. If the boss wanted to discuss a security issue, he'd talk to Sam, not me. I left my office and looked around the hall in the security department to see if anyone else was heading to a meeting, remembering to look up, since so many of my colleagues had wings. There wasn't any flurry of people leaving offices, so that meant this summons was probably not related to my job.

I headed up to the office in one of the building's turrets. Trix greeted me from behind the reception desk. "You can go right in," she said.

I eased open the heavy door to the chief executive's office, where the boss sat at his conference table with Owen already there, as well as Sam. Uh oh, I thought.

Merlin—yes, the Merlin from the King Arthur stories—greeted me. "Ah, there you are, Katie," he said. "Come have a seat." He didn't sound too upset or angry, so I probably wasn't in trouble. I took a seat next to Owen and glanced at him to see if he knew what this was about. He gave me a barely perceptible "I have no idea" shrug.

"We have one more person joining us," Merlin said, "but I think we should talk before he arrives. I'm sure you noticed the incident yesterday not far from here."

"You mean the flying city bus?" I asked.

"Yes, that would be the one in question."

"We didn't have anything to do with it," I said.

"And we don't know who did," Owen added. He sighed. "But security footage showed me there, so of course I'm under suspicion. Is that it?"

Merlin's genial expression faded. "I'm afraid so. I'm sure it's a formality, but they do have to investigate."

"Even if he did it, he saved a life, so it's not exactly evil," I said.

"We all know that's not the point," Merlin said.

"My guys who were on duty at the time thought the magic came from the other side of the street," Sam put in. "We're still looking at footage to see if we recognize anyone there."

"That's where the people who were talking about it and calling attention to it were," I said. "Yeah, they were the ones with the best view, so obviously they'd talk about it if they saw it, but it makes me wonder if whoever did it wanted it to be seen and noticed."

"But why would a magical person want to be noticed like that?" Owen asked. "I can understand forgetting yourself in a crisis, but this was rather ostentatious. I can think of a dozen easier and less obvious ways to have resolved that situation. In fact, I was preparing to use one of them when that other person acted."

"And what way was that, Mr. Palmer?" a voice said from the doorway.

The door was behind us, so Owen and I had to turn to see a bland, business-suited man entering Merlin's office. I thought I was reasonably nondescript, of average size and coloring, but I was striking compared to this guy. His hair wasn't quite blond, gray, or brown, but somewhere in the middle. There was nothing distinguishable about his features. I felt my eyes sliding off him, like there was nothing to focus on, and it couldn't have been a "don't notice me" magical spell since magic doesn't work on me. It was like he'd been bred in a lab that produced mid-level bureaucrats.

"Jabez Jones, from the Council's Magical Activities Department." He introduced himself as he approached the table and took the seat next to Merlin. "And it seems you're already aware of why I'm here."

"We were witnesses to an incident of public magical use yesterday," Owen said. His voice was even, but spots of color blooming on his cheeks gave away his emotions.

"Hmmm. Witnesses. Possibly. At least, Miss Chandler here was a witness, since it doesn't seem she currently has the power to do that sort of thing." He glanced up at me over rimless glasses—I hadn't even realized he was wearing glasses. "Or do you? It's so hard to keep track."

"I'm immune to magic. No power to do anything, but nothing works on me," I confirmed. "But I can sense magic in use, and I know

Owen didn't do anything yesterday."

"Hmmm. But you were saying as I arrived that you would have done something," Jones said, turning to Owen.

"I was considering it, since I can't in good conscience watch someone be killed when I'm capable of saving him. Levitating a bus was a waste of power and wouldn't even have occurred to me as a solution. It would have been easier and less showy to just speed him up a little bit so that he was out of the way. He might not have even noticed that he was walking faster. I might also have tried slowing the bus, putting it in a time bubble, but that's a little more intricate a working and would have required more time than I had."

"Did you see who did the spell?"

Before Owen could answer, Sam said, "The magical force seemed to come from the other side of the street, which makes sense if Katie here couldn't sense it. Magic doesn't work on her, but she's got a real nose for it. We're lookin' into who might have been doing anything over there."

"Hmmm," Jones said again, and that tic was already getting under my skin. Every time he did it, I wanted to kick him in the ankle. "And it seems like Miss Chandler was present for another public magic incident this weekend."

"I was in the vicinity, but not close enough to identify anyone involved in it. I was minding my own business, shopping for a wedding gown." I didn't know how much Merlin wanted me to tell this guy, but I decided not to say anything more unless one of my superiors brought it up. This Jabez Jones guy rubbed me the wrong way. I wasn't the biggest fan of the magical Council. They only seemed to show up to cause more problems after the MSI team had dealt with a situation.

"Hmmm. Interesting coincidence, though."

I balled up my fists under the table and hooked my feet under the base of my chair so I wouldn't be tempted to act on the urge to kick.

"Totally unrelated incidents," Sam said. "One was people getting emotional, the other was someone not havin' time to think. It happens when people have power they don't know how to use."

Jones raised an eyebrow, momentarily making his face moderately interesting. "You think this is all due to an untrained, undiscovered wizard?"

Sam shrugged, making his wings rise with his shoulders. "That's just one possible explanation that we're considerin'. It has happened before. Someone realizes they can do crazy things, has seen one superhero movie too many, and goes around doing stuff like making buses fly. If that's the case, then we need to track this person down and bring him into the fold."

“But the incident at the bridal sale involved one of your employees.”

“Yeah, but our person didn’t start it. At any rate, Palmer was only at one of these events, so you can’t pin that one on him. Katie can’t do magic at all, so the best she could manage is being the mastermind.”

“Hmmm. Well. I do see your point, and it’s admirable how you defend your friend, but you’re hardly objective.”

“I am, however, being logical,” Sam said, his voice even harder than his stony skin.

I thought that the fact that someone involved with a magic watchdog blog had been present for the incidents I’d witnessed was interesting. There couldn’t be that many people in the city who believed magic was real and who were looking out for it, so what were the odds that they managed to be there when something magical happened? That suggested to me that there was some kind of setup going on here, someone using magic so it could be seen by them. But was someone wanting to make magic public using the watchdog people and deliberately staging events while they were present, or were the watchdogs actually magical, themselves, and staging the events so they could report on them? I was leaning toward the former, since I’d expect there to be better proof than they’d produced so far if they’d set it up themselves.

Then again, that’s what they’d expect us to suspect. Perfect video and photos of magical events would look like they’d been staged. If I were running some kind of campaign to make people aware of magic, I’d probably do it with out-of-focus photos and grainy video that just barely missed being clear evidence. Only when I knew I was getting a lot of attention would I come up with something that might be seen as absolute proof.

I guess I was still thinking like I worked in marketing, but it was nice knowing that I wasn’t wasting my skills. I was just applying them differently.

Sam tilted his head like he was listening to something, then said, “My people have come up with some surveillance video that might shed a little light on this.”

Merlin waved a hand, and a set of cabinet doors on the wall opened to reveal a flat-screen television. Another wave of the hand, and a picture came up, grainy security footage from behind where Owen and I had been standing. In fact, we were at the lower right corner of the picture.

The jaywalker started into the street, and the bus approached. Just as the bus left the ground, the picture froze. Sam flew across the room and tapped the screen with a talon. “See this guy here?” The image was indistinct, but it looked like a figure on the sidewalk was standing

with one arm out in front of him, like he was doing a spell. "That may be our rogue wizard."

"Hmmm, there's nothing to indicate that he's doing magic," Jones pointed out. "You can't tell whether he's using a hand gesture or just pointing at the phenomenon."

"But we can tell that Owen, here, isn't doing anything," Sam said, pointing to the right of the screen.

"Can you back up the video a few frames?" Owen asked.

Sam waved a hand, and we watched the whole incident move incrementally backward, to the point where the bus was still on the ground. "Ah, yeah, there it is," he said.

"He's got his hand outstretched even before the bus takes off," Owen said. "He might be pointing out the jaywalker who's in peril, but my guess is, this is our wizard. No one else shown on this video is doing anything, so unless there's someone else who's out of the shot, like maybe on the bus, I think this is the one we should focus on. Is there any way to clean up that video and identify the person?"

"We can only work with what we've got," Sam said. "This is a bad camera. I'm not sure what good they think it does because you'd never be able to identify a person from what it records. We're still looking for other footage, and we may find something better. If he just happens to be a bystander who took action, he may regularly be in that place at that time, so we'll stake out the plaza for a few days and see what happens, maybe stage a potential accident and see if it's just a guy with a superhero complex. If he's going public on purpose, he may be harder to find again."

"Thank you, Sam," Merlin said. He turned to Jones. "Was there anything else you needed? As you can see, my people are well aware of the seriousness of these incidents and are engaged in an active investigation."

"I'll need formal statements from our eyewitnesses," Jones said, shuffling through his paperwork. "Separately. Mr. Palmer first."

I left the office and hung out by Trix's desk. "That guy was Council, right?" she said, keeping her voice low.

"Afraid so."

"Owen's not in trouble again, is he?"

"Hard to say. It sounded like they want him to be."

She shook her head. "Will they never leave him alone? You two might be happier if you move to your hometown after you're married. They won't care who he is there."

I laughed at the thought. "You've obviously never met my mother. Besides, there's not much magic there. He'd be miserable." Actually, Owen was pretty mellow. He'd probably be happy wherever he was. But I'd spent a few months back home last year, and I knew I didn't

want to live there again, even with Owen.

The office door opened, and Owen came out. I couldn't read his face, but when he smiled at me, I noticed that the smile didn't reach his eyes. "That bad, huh?" I said.

"What? No. They're ready for you."

I didn't think his denial sounded very convincing, which gave me a tense, queasy feeling in my stomach as I entered the office. I wasn't worried about being accused of anything. I was more concerned with stopping myself from throttling Jones.

"Hmmm, Miss Chandler," the bureaucrat said as I entered and shut the door behind me. "Please, have a seat."

I was glad to see that Merlin and Sam were still there, so there were friendly witnesses. Then again, there would be witnesses if his "hmmm" made me snap and throttle Jones.

He rifled through his papers, came up with a form, and carefully wrote my name in the "witness" blank. His handwriting looked like something that would come out of a typewriter, complete with serifs. When he finally finished that, I braced myself for a question, but he moved on to write out the title of the incident and a case number. I readied myself for questioning again, but he filled in the blanks for Sam and Merlin as witnesses, his name as interviewer, and the date.

By this time, I'd grown bored enough to be distracted, so I jumped when he said, "Hmmm, Miss Chandler, can you describe the incident in question for me?"

"You are referring to the Case of the Floating Bus, aren't you? Not the Case of the Bridal Brawl?"

"The Bridal Brawl will be a separate form. We'll get to that one later."

"Oh, goody," I said under my breath. "Okay, then, we—Owen Palmer and I—were leaving work yesterday, shortly after five, and we were discussing choosing flowers for our wedding. The walk light was red, and we stopped. I wasn't really paying that much attention because we had a list of florists to visit and I was looking at that. I glanced up, and a guy was walking across the street in the middle of the block, against the light, when a city bus approached. It might have hit him, but it levitated over him and landed after he was out of the way. I didn't see who did it, and I didn't feel any magic being used near me. Any veiling spell wouldn't have worked on me, but it was pretty clear that other people saw it. That's about it."

"Hmmmmmmmm." His hum was longer, and he kept it going as he finished writing. At least he stayed on pitch the whole time, only going a bit flat toward the end when he must have run out of breath. I got the impression he didn't even realize he was doing it. I doubted he'd appreciate being clued in. Finally, he looked up. "You're certain

that Owen Palmer had nothing to do with it?"

"Yes. I'm accustomed to the way his magic feels, and I didn't feel it. He was as shocked as anyone by what happened."

The corners of his mouth drooped a bit, and a small crease formed in his forehead while he finished filling out the form, giving the impression that he was disappointed. Had he hoped I'd rat out Owen once we were no longer in the room together? "Is there anything else you recall about the incident? Do you remember seeing the person from the video with his hand outstretched?"

"Really, it's all a blur. I don't think I could identify anyone, not even the jaywalker." No sooner had I said it than I recalled one of the photos on the blog. Maybe I was just adding details in my mind now that I knew about the pointing man, but I had a mental image of a man with a similar posture in one of the blog photos. I'd assumed at the time that he'd merely been pointing at the strange event, but maybe there was something else there. I didn't want to say anything now because that would mean talking about the magic watchdogs. I figured we could always send the Council an update later if we discovered anything. I tried to keep my face blank, so it wouldn't be obvious that I was withholding information, but he was too busy filling out the form to look at me, which told me he was more of a paper pusher than a real investigator.

"Now, about the incident you have so succinctly described as the Bridal Brawl." He shuffled papers and came up with another form, filling out all the information yet again. It seemed to me that he could have done that afterward rather than wasting my time. On the other hand, he really did have amazing handwriting. I wondered if he was available for addressing wedding invitations.

I didn't wait for him to finish and ask me a question before I said, "I'm not sure how much I can tell you because I didn't see anything. I know there was a commotion, but I didn't see the people involved. I wasn't even sure it was magic until later. I was busy shopping for a wedding gown, which is an all-consuming task." Feeling like I was throwing Trix under the bus, I added, "Trix, the receptionist, was there, and she may have seen more than I did."

He made a few notes, then said, "Hmmm, I don't think that will be necessary." Which I considered proof that this was more or less a witch hunt against Owen, making sure he wasn't going rogue. While the bus incident was flashier, the bridal brawl had made the television news. "Thank you for your time, Miss Chandler. We will contact you if we have additional questions."

When I finally got back to my office, I pulled up the blog again and clicked on the picture I'd recalled, which did show the pointing man. Actually, it showed his hand. His face was blocked by someone else's

head. And he definitely wasn't pointing. His hand was formed into an odd shape, so odd that it was extremely unlikely that he'd just happened to hold his hand like that when pointing at a strange event. I printed a copy of the photo and took it to Owen's lab.

"What do you make of this?" I asked, dropping it on Owen's desk.

"That's the guy from the bus incident?" he asked, bending over to examine it.

"His hand. I'll have to see if there's a shot that shows his face. But he's not pointing."

"No, he's not. He's doing a levitation spell—not the one I would have chosen, but I guess it works if you don't mind a huge energy expenditure. It's a formal spell, which kills the untrained wizard trying to be a superhero theory."

"So that means it's someone who knows what he's doing, doing it on purpose."

He leaned back in his chair. "I don't think it's all that ominous. After all, he did save a life. If he really wanted to expose magic, wouldn't he have been a bit more visible and obvious, taking credit for it? My guess is that it was just someone who panicked in the moment, saved the guy, then realized he screwed up. Your rank-and-file wizard isn't used to doing big things like that. Coordinating a veiling while levitating a bus using that spell would be beyond most people. I'm not sure I'd have had the energy to do both."

Sighing and shaking his head, he added, "Really, I should have had the presence of mind to veil what he was doing as soon as I spotted it. That's where I messed up."

"I hope you didn't say that to the Spanish Inquisition. He was after dirt on you. I don't think he cared at all about these public magic events."

"If they're having to dig that hard, then I must be doing something right," he said with an attempt at a smile that I thought looked a bit pained. "And since I know I'm not doing these things, I don't have anything to worry about."

I wished I could be as optimistic as he was.

I'd barely made it back to my office when I got summoned to another meeting. It wasn't in the boss's office or in security, but rather in a place I hadn't visited yet, and I thought I knew this building fairly well. I found it easily enough, but I hesitated outside the door, wondering what this was all about. More dealings with the Council? Something to do with my Collegium case?

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and entered a room that looked like the bullpen of a newspaper in an old movie, except there were computers instead of typewriters on the desks. An unshaven man leaning back in his desk chair noticed me entering and called out,

“Favorite fantasy animal, favorite part of town?”

“Excuse me?” I replied.

“Answer the questions.”

“Um, dragon, Central Park.”

He sat up, leaned over his computer, and typed for about a minute before leaning back again. “Okay, that’ll work. Now, what can I do you for?”

“I was told to come here. I’m Katie Chandler.”

“The one who saw the flying bus incident?”

“Yes.”

He sat up, scooted his chair over so he could reach another chair nearby, knocked some books off that chair, and dragged it back to his desk. “Here, have a seat.” Swiveling around, he called out, “Hey, Larry, she’s here.”

The man at a nearby desk who’d been slumped over his keyboard sat up, blinking. “Here?”

“The bus girl.”

“I really didn’t have anything to do with that incident,” I said as I sat in the indicated chair.

“Doesn’t matter,” the first man said as Larry stood and stretched sleepily. Larry came over and sat on the edge of the first man’s desk. “We thought getting your perspective might add a little verisimilitude to our coverage.”

“Is this a newspaper?” I asked, frowning in confusion.

“Depends on how you define ‘newspaper.’” He wagged his eyebrows and grinned. “Powers.”

“I don’t have any,” I said. “I’m a magical immune.”

“No, Powers is my name.”

“Isn’t that a bit on the nose for a wizard?”

He rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it. But my middle name is even worse, and no, I’m not telling. Anyway, we need to make sure we get the facts straight in our story so they can’t discount it because we got something wrong.”

“I’m still not sure what this is all about,” I said, shaking my head.

“Let’s just say that we help muddy the waters about magical incidents,” Larry said. “We report them alongside stories about Elvis sightings and dragons in Central Park, which makes anyone else who reports these incidents look less credible.”

“I knew magical people have been doing that sort of thing for a long time, but I didn’t know you put out your own tabloid,” I said. “Which one is it?”

Powers smirked. “That’s a secret.” Turning his chair to face his desk and placing his fingers on the keyboard of his computer, he said, “Tell me what happened.”

I gave him a quick rundown, repeating what I'd told the Council inspector. "Sorry, not as exciting as you'd think a flying bus should be," I concluded with a shrug. "It was only a second or two and not that dramatic. When you can take the bus to Staten Island, that would be a story."

"We already did that one, about five years ago," Larry said.

"Don't you feel bad about misleading people?"

"Who's misleading?" Powers asked with a shrug. "Our true stories are one hundred percent true. That's why we wanted to interview you. We merely happen to surround those true stories with others that are maybe less true. It's up to readers to decide which stories to believe, the same as with any other tabloid."

"We actually probably have more factual content than most," Larry said.

"And those are the least believable stories," Powers added.

As I returned to my office, I reflected that the magical world had been working for centuries to keep their secret, so obviously they had mechanisms in place. It was just weird to keep finding out new things about this world after I'd been involved for more than a year. It would have been nice to know we had our own newspaper when I was responsible for marketing. Then again, a tabloid designed to convince nonmagical people that there was no magic wasn't exactly a great venue for promoting a magical company to magical people.

Although it seemed like the magical world had things under control, I couldn't shake the feeling that something shifty was going on, and that it might be bigger than they realized. I didn't think it would be dangerous to look into the magic watchdogs. If I could find out who these people were and what their agenda was, we'd have a better sense of how it all fit together and whether it was anything to worry about. And it didn't have to get in the way of my other work.

I didn't even have to do anything so obvious as contact Abigail Williams. I suspected they'd be looking for witnesses who'd been on that bus by looking for regular commuters on that route. All I needed was to be on that bus when they did so. As undercover missions went, that should be a cakewalk.

My one worry about my scheme was that Owen would decide we needed to do more wedding planning or go out to dinner that evening. I definitely didn't want to go looking for people who were on alert for magic with a wizard at my side. But my luck held and he made up for time lost from that interrogation by working late. I checked the route of the bus and left work a little early to catch it several blocks away from the office. I hoped that way I would avoid any possibility of looking like I was connected to MSI.

As usually happened around rush hour, there was a long gap between buses, with a crowd forming at the bus stop, and then two arrived practically at the same time. I hesitated, unsure which bus I should try to board. The first one was packed, and the driver only let people off, motioning everyone waiting to the second bus. That settled that. I boarded the second bus and took a seat midway back, where I could eavesdrop on conversations throughout the bus. I pulled a paperback book out of my bag and held it up, pretending to read while I peered over and around it. Every so often, I turned a page.

Two stops later, we reached the block where the incident had happened. A cluster of people boarded the bus there. None of them looked familiar. None of them even looked all that suspicious. They all seemed to be ordinary office workers. Then again, I wasn't sure what I expected a witch hunter to look like in the twenty-first century.

A couple of people spoke on their cell phones, but otherwise the bus was quiet, everyone keeping to themselves. A young man took the seat in front of me. He wore a shirt and tie, but instead of a suit jacket, he had on a hooded sweatshirt. Probably some kind of clerk, I guessed. He glanced around the bus as though taking stock of the other passengers. I couldn't get a good read on whether he was looking around for a purpose or merely being curious.

After we'd gone about a block, he turned to the person across the aisle from him. "Hey, were you on this bus yesterday?"

I forced myself not to lift my gaze from my book, but I held my breath and strained to hear the conversation over the roar of the bus engine and the phone call going on behind me.

"Every day," the other passenger, an older African American man, said with a world-weary tone.

Most people would have taken that as a "leave me alone" cue, but the young man continued in a way that reminded me of an eager puppy. "I was waiting for the bus, and I could have sworn I saw it fly."

The other man gave a soft, derisive snort and shifted to stare out the window, signaling an end to the conversation. Undaunted, the puppy turned to the passenger in front of him. “Did you notice anything weird?”

That passenger, a middle-aged woman in business attire, turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow. “Weird? On a city bus? Perish the thought,” she said dryly.

He turned to face me, his enthusiasm undimmed. “What about you?” he asked. It was probably my imagination, but I felt like he was watching me intently. Did he know who I was?

“I don’t normally take this bus,” I said with a shrug that was as casual as I could make it. “I had a meeting today. Sorry.”

It seemed to take forever before he smiled and said, “Too bad. It was really cool. I’m dying to know what it was like for the people on the bus.”

After the next stop, he changed seats and started the process again with the passengers at the back of the bus. I didn’t realize until he moved and I let myself relax how tense his attention had made me. My breathing became much easier once he was talking to someone else. On the other hand, it became more difficult to eavesdrop without turning around and being obvious about it. I also had to guess which people he might be talking to, based on what I remembered of them and which person I assumed went with which voice.

Most of the people were as reluctant to acknowledge him as the rest of the passengers had been, but he finally got someone to admit that he’d been on the bus and had noticed something weird. “Yeah, it was like the bus was slamming on its brakes. I braced myself—I’ve been in a bus wreck before—but instead of stopping, it was like we bounced, and then we dropped, but then we kept going like nothing happened.”

“What do you think happened?” the puppy asked. I uncrossed my legs, shifted my weight, and turned in my seat, like I was trying to get comfortable. That allowed me to look behind me just enough to see that the puppy was talking to a guy about his age, dressed in a nice suit.

“I don’t know,” the other passenger said. “I thought maybe we hit a bump that launched us, but it was too smooth for that. The landing wasn’t even all that jarring. Or maybe we never really left the ground. It just felt like we did.”

“Oh, you definitely left the ground.” The puppy leaned closer to him and said in a stage whisper, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but from where I stood, it looked like magic. The bus was going to hit a guy, but instead it went right over him. It was amazing, and a lot of other people saw it, too. I did a search, and there was this blog full of

reports. You ought to go there and give them an account from inside the bus. They're trying to figure out what's going on."

"Magic?" the other passenger said. "Like Harry Potter?"

"I didn't see a wand, but yeah, it was kind of like that crazy bus in the third movie, only it flew instead of shrinking."

"Um, yeah, okay," the other passenger said, raising a newspaper to block his face.

"The blog was called something like 'Magic Watch' if you want to look it up." The passenger didn't respond, and the puppy got off at the next stop. I wished I had one of those lipstick cameras spies use in movies so I could get a good picture of him. He wasn't quite as nondescript as Jabez Jones had been, but he was a fairly generic New York white male twentysomething guy. I wasn't sure I'd be able to pick him out of a crowd if I spotted him again. Since he'd boarded near the MSI office, I wondered if any of the security gargoyles watching the plaza had noticed him.

The bus was heading toward my apartment, so I decided to stay on for the rest of the trip, even though it would be slower than the subway. I figured I looked less suspicious if I didn't get off so soon after the questioner did, and if anyone was watching me, there wasn't anything unusual about me going home. My last assignment had made me paranoid about being watched.

As my block neared and it was time to put away my book and gather my things, I noticed something on the floor of the bus: a business card, like the one Abigail had given me. It looked like the puppy had scattered them around, perhaps for passengers who might have seen something to pick up in case they didn't want to talk to him but were still curious about the event. Even though I was pretty sure he wasn't named Abigail Williams, that name was on the card. Maybe that was the pen name everyone at the blog wrote under rather than the name of the woman I'd met.

I found myself torn about how to pursue this case. Not too long ago, I'd been someone who noticed odd things that no one else seemed to notice, and it had been a huge relief to learn that they were real, that I wasn't just imagining things. Only, in my case, no one else could see them. The magic used to hide magic from the rest of the world didn't work on me, so I saw what was really going on. It hadn't only been that I was a small-town hick in awe of big-city things that the locals took for granted. There really was stuff they couldn't have seen even if they were looking right at it.

In this case, it was people who were open-minded enough to accept what they saw without going into denial or employing any of the usual psychological tricks we use to maintain our own worldview. I had to respect them for that. If they didn't have any kind of

nefarious agenda, I was inclined to leave them alone. Let the magical people deal with their own by reminding them to watch themselves and remember to keep their magic covered up. Gaslighting people for being perceptive would put us on the wrong side, I was afraid.

The next morning, I checked the magic-watching blogs again, but there weren't any additional eyewitness reports of the bus incident. I took note of the new entries about other alleged magic use so I could cross-reference them with our gargoyle patrols. I didn't spot the eager puppy in any of the photos from the bus flight submitted to the blogs. If he'd really been there, he'd managed to stay out of camera range—or maybe he'd been behind a camera.

Sam wasn't in his office, so I headed to the front entrance, where he often sat on the awning. "I don't suppose we've got any good footage of that plaza I could look at," I said.

"From the bus day?"

"Yeah." I told him about my bus ride the day before. "And I know you didn't assign me to the case, but I did it on my own time."

"Hey, I'm not gonna knock you for taking initiative, as long as you get your assignments done. What're you lookin' for?"

"I want to see if this guy really was a witness on the plaza or if he's part of one of these magic watchdog groups and trying to find witnesses. I suspect the latter, considering he was distributing cards for their blog."

"I'll have it sent to your computer," he said. "You think this is something to dig into?"

I forced myself not to sigh wearily. "I don't know. I mostly want to rule out anything bad. Better to find out they're just a bunch of harmless crackpots than be surprised when they aren't."

"You're catching on fast around here. In the security business, we like to say that a little paranoia is healthy. But I doubt there's anything to worry about."

"You mean other than the Council interrogating Owen."

He gave his wings a brisk flap. "That's an entirely different issue."

"Should I be worried about it?"

"Of course. But not any more so than usual. They're always gonna be watching that boy."

In spite of his assurances, I did check the video of the plaza. I didn't spot anyone who looked like the puppy—well, actually, I spotted half a dozen who could have been him, but I was pretty sure they weren't. It was hard to tell in grainy video and with a guy who didn't have any odd or distinguishing features. Would it have killed them to send a redhead who'd have been easy to spot?

I tried to push it all to the back of my mind and focus on more important things, like planning a wedding. It seemed you had to be

even more specific when using magic than when doing things in the real world. For the ceremony back home, I could (and did) say, “Oh, I don’t know, whatever kind of white flower you can get.” To have them magically created, I needed to know the specific type, provide a picture, and name the exact size, quantity, and arrangement. It was a control freak’s dream, but the details didn’t matter to me. Unfortunately, without the details, you might end up with a white blob instead of a flower.

There were times when I thought it wasn’t worth the effort and I should go a more normal route, but the magic wasn’t costing anything, and if you’re marrying a wizard, you need to get into the spirit of things. Besides, I had enough real-world stuff to deal with for the blessing ceremony we were having back home, and we were too close to the New York wedding to have time to arrange it without magic.

It helped somewhat that Owen’s detail-oriented, and he actually cared about this stuff, so for the most part, I was able to get away with saying, “Oh, I don’t know, something like that,” and he would narrow it down to the specifics, then ask my approval. But even without having to make all the decisions, I still had to look at flowers, centerpieces, cakes, and catering menus. We also had to audition bands.

I’ve never really been a “going out” person. Even as a college student, I didn’t hit the bar or club scene. Owen’s more of a homebody than I am, so most of our hot dates involve takeout and a movie on TV. But listening to bands meant going to bars, and since the bands who could play at a magical wedding had to be magical bands, I was about to get a good look at the magical bar scene. I’d been to a couple of magical parties, so I’d been putting off this task as long as possible, to the point where we’d be lucky to find someone decent who wasn’t already booked. If you think normal people can be obnoxious when they get drunk and lower their inhibitions, just imagine what magical people are like. Things can get pretty hairy.

I secretly hoped something might happen to keep me from having to deal with finding a band, like maybe a meteor strike or someone handing us a demo CD from the perfect band that was looking for gigs. But a couple of weeks after the bridal brawl, Owen said on the way to work, “Do you have plans tonight?”

“You mean other than sweatpants, pizza, a movie, and Gemma’s binder?”

“This is an item from Gemma’s binder.”

I groaned. “No, not picking a band.”

“It’s one of the few things we haven’t done yet, and we can’t just poof one into existence. Though I did research whether that might be

possible.”

“What about those self-playing magical instruments, like we had at that customer event last summer?”

“That’s probably what we’ll do for the ceremony, and maybe for the dinner part of the reception, but we’ll need something people can dance to later.”

“There has to be dancing?”

“People do expect it.”

“They can’t just send us CDs to listen to?”

“Do you really want someone you’ve only heard on a recording playing at your wedding? You won’t know how they look or act. Or what kind of magic they use.”

That made me worry about something else. “Jake didn’t give you the list of groups to consider, did he?”

“No! Rod did. In fact, he and Marcia are going to join us.” Rod was Owen’s best friend going all the way back to childhood, and he’d started dating Marcia not too long after I got into the magical world. He was a notorious Lothario, though he’d reformed somewhat after more than a year with Marcia. Still, such a ladies’ man could be expected to have a decent list of musicians likely to impress people, even if it was about a year out of date.

“What time? And how much will I have to dress up?” I asked, grudgingly.

“The set starts at nine, and Rod said nice, but not formal.”

“So I’ll have time for a short nap.” And I’d need a wardrobe consultation with Gemma because “nice but not formal” was the kind of fashion gray area that made me break out in a cold sweat of indecision. For a split second, I started to think that having a fairy godmother around to provide me with the perfect outfit would be nice, but then I remembered the mayhem she’d caused when I’d had one and shut that thought down before it ran the risk of summoning her.

It turned out that Gemma and her boyfriend, Philip, who’d spent about a century as a frog (long story) and was therefore rather old-fashioned, were also joining us. I felt bad about leaving Nita out, but she was working, and I had no idea what a magical nightclub would be like and whether it would be safe to bring her along. She didn’t even know I was having a wedding in New York, though she was the maid of honor for the one back home.

This wedding was turning out to be so complicated.

With six of us, we couldn’t fit into one cab, but Rod had arranged for a limo. “We might as well impress them by arriving in style,” he said as he poured a glass of champagne once we were all in the limo. He looked quite suave, even to me. Rod isn’t naturally the most

attractive guy, and he habitually uses an illusion to make himself handsome. That was one of the first things that proved my magical immunity. Every woman on the subway had drooled over him, while I found him extremely unattractive. Since then, he's done better about taking care of himself, so while he'll never be as stunningly handsome as Owen is, his charming personality combined with his unique features to make him really quite appealing.

I haven't always had great experiences in limousines. There was the time that fairy godmother more or less kidnapped Owen and me and sent us off on a terrible fancy date in a limo, and then there was the way I had to be driven to and from work during my latest undercover assignment. It sounds like a perk, but it was all about controlling me and keeping me from knowing where the office actually was. As a result, instead of enjoying the luxury, I tensed up.

Rod handed me the glass of champagne he'd just poured. "Here, you look like you need this more than I do."

Owen put his arm around me. "You can see out the windows in this one," he said softly, revealing that he knew exactly what I'd been thinking. I leaned against him, and between the champagne and the warmth of his proximity, I felt almost relaxed by the time we reached the club.

The place just looked like a nightclub to me, but Gemma said, "Do they play concerts after hours at stationery stores?" as we approached the entrance.

"Trust me," Rod said. He nodded to the man standing just inside the door as we entered.

"Oh, it's a nightclub in disguise," Gemma said once we were inside the club itself.

I didn't know what to expect of a magical nightclub—maybe something like the cantina in Star Wars, with a band made up of alien creatures playing to a crowd of strange people drinking oddly colored drinks. I wasn't too far off the mark, only instead of aliens, they were magical races—human wizards, along with fairies, elves, gnomes, and a few things I couldn't identify. I leaned over to Gemma and whispered, "Does all this look weird to you?"

"Yeah. It's like Halloween, except it's not October."

That meant the magical people weren't veiling their appearance. I supposed that was the point of a magical nightclub. They could go there and be themselves without having to fit into the human world. I wondered what it must be like, having to change your appearance in public. They could do veiling spells that only worked on ordinary people, so they looked like themselves to magical folk or to people like me, but still, I wondered if it ever rankled. If anyone had a good reason to want magic to be more open, it might be those like elves

and fairies. On the other hand, as Trix had said, there was also the chance that people would want to study them or treat them as something less than human. I made a mental note to talk to some of my fairy and elf friends about this.

But I wasn't here to work. I was here to find a band to play at my wedding. Drinks magically appeared on our table, and there was a light show just below the ceiling to accompany the recorded music playing while we waited for the band.

When the music stopped and the lights dimmed, an expectant hush filled the bar. At first glance, the band that took the stage didn't look any different from what you might see at your typical Greenwich Village jazz club. But then I noticed the ears. They were elves, which meant things could get very interesting.

Instead of guitars, they had harps of various sizes and shapes. There was a drum kit made out of different kinds of gourds, and the guy at the edge of the stage had a rack of several flutes, from the typical one like what I'd played in high-school band to something that looked like it had been swiped from Peter Pan.

The flautist played a note, and the others tuned their harps to it—that is, they plucked strings that were already perfectly in tune. They were just showing off. Elves made humans with perfect pitch look tone deaf. They could probably look at those harps and know whether or not they were in tune.

And then they started playing. I'm not sure what I'd call their music. It defied genre classification. The harps and flutes gave it a Celtic air, but at the same time, there was a definite groove going on. One of the harps was essentially a string bass with a more haunting sound, and the "drummer" kept a driving beat going on those gourds. Then there were the vocals. An elf singing could make people cry. The sound was crystal clear, and you felt as much as heard it. When they sang together in tight, complex harmonies, it was breathtaking.

After the first song, Marcia turned to me, tears in her eyes. "You have got to have them play for your wedding," she said.

Gemma gripped my arm and whispered, "Please stop me before I throw my underwear on the stage."

"It's elfsong. It's magic," I explained. "I mean, it's really, really good music, but the music does something to you."

"They must not sell a lot of drinks here when these guys play, because who needs alcohol? This is like a drug."

That made me wonder whether this was what we wanted for our wedding. I leaned over and whispered to Owen, "Aren't there some risks involved with having an elf band?"

But the music was starting again, and he gestured for me to be quiet. It seemed that I was the only one in the bar who was immune to

their music. I did like the sound, but the effect on me was like any other good music. It made me sigh a little, and I could imagine listening to a CD of this on repeat, but I wasn't as blissed-out as everyone else here. The entire club seemed to be mesmerized.

As I looked around the room to see how the other patrons were acting, I did a double take when I thought I recognized the "puppy" from the bus. If he was with an anti-magic watchdog group, what was he doing in a magic club, grooving to elfsong? He was sitting next to another clean-cut young white guy. I'd never seen a good image of the bus wizard's face, but this could have been him. Maybe. Then again, both of them were nondescript enough that I couldn't be sure. Definitely not sure enough to confront them. I tried to memorize their features without staring for so long that they'd notice me. Then again, as wrapped up as they were in the music, I could probably have crawled into their laps without them paying any attention to me.

When I turned back to the stage, I found myself looking right at the lead singer. Apparently, he'd noticed that I wasn't enraptured, and he was the kind of artist who'll ignore hundreds of favorable reviews to fixate on the one "meh." He began singing directly to me, making intense eye contact as he sang. Next to me, Gemma moaned and sank lower in her seat. I smiled at him and nodded as I sipped my drink and wondered how I'd ordered another. I hadn't even thought about needing a fresh drink, and here one was.

By the end of the set, I was afraid I'd have to drag my friends and fiancé out of there. It would be like getting sailors past sirens. These elves could probably have made anyone in that room—other than me—do anything they wanted. I imagined they had more than the usual number of groupies. When they left the stage, sobs broke out among the audience.

"Yeah, no," I said to Owen. "If they've got CDs for sale, I want one, but I'd rather not have my wedding guests turned into blissed-out zombies by the band. That music probably counts as a controlled substance. If you'll notice, no one is dancing. We're hiring a dance band, aren't we?"

He shook his head like he was trying to clear it and picked up and drained the drink he'd forgotten about. "Maybe there's a way to shield the audience a bit, let some of the effect slip through, but without anyone losing it completely."

"Or we could listen to some more bands."

Marcia leaned across the table and grabbed my hand. "No, you have to hire them. Please?"

"And I think we need to get out of here so the rest of you can sober up," I said.

Gemma made a little whimpering noise in the back of her throat

and I turned to see the lead singer approaching our table, a drink in his hand. "Are you enjoying the show?" he asked in a softly accented voice. His close-cropped hair made his pointed ears stand out even more.

"It's the best thing I've ever heard," Gemma said. "Can I go home with you?" Philip elbowed her.

"I never want to hear any other music, ever," Marcia sobbed.

"It's really good," I said. He flinched, and I decided to take pity on him. "Sorry, magical immune. The whammy doesn't work on me. But I do like the music, even without it."

He gave a big, relieved grin. "Oh, that explains it. It was so weird looking out into the audience and seeing someone who wasn't as into it as everyone else was. I thought something was wrong."

He came across as awkward and a little shy, wincing when people came up to him just to touch him and bask in his presence. I decided he wasn't doing it to be manipulative. It was just part of performing as an elf.

Once Owen seemed to have come completely out of the music's spell, I whispered, "I think the bus guy was here, and he was with the guy who was investigating the bus incident."

"Where?"

I turned to point them out, but they weren't still at that table. "Damn. They moved, or they left."

"Are you sure it was them? And together?"

"I'm pretty certain about the guy riding the bus. Maybe ninety percent? Less sure about the bus wizard, since we didn't get a good look at him. But it could have been him. Maybe."

"Someone investigating magic is at a magic club?"

"Yeah, I thought that was fishy, too." The lights dimmed for the next set and we had to stop talking, lest we earn the wrath of the other patrons.

It took some effort, but Owen and I managed to get the others out of the club after that set. By this time, it was close to midnight, way later than I was used to staying up, and that half-hour nap I'd taken after work had long since worn off. I had to fight not to yawn. It was early April, so it was still rather chilly in the middle of the night. The night air after we left the heady atmosphere of the club snapped all of us out of our stupors.

"Wow, so that's magical music," Marcia said, shaking her head.

"That's elf music," Rod corrected. "I forgot about that part. Sorry."

"As much as I loved it, I have to say they're probably not your best bet for a reception band," Gemma said.

"I think we're all agreed on that," I said.

"Where to next?" Rod asked.

“Home!” I voted. “You don’t have another band in mind for us to hear tonight, do you?”

“We might catch the next set for another one I think you’ll like, but it’s probably best that you not listen to them after hearing elfsong. Everything’s probably going to sound a bit lame tonight. I’ll call the car.” He got out his phone and began pushing buttons.

“Are there any late-night dessert places?” I asked. “I could do with some chocolate.”

Gemma put her arm around my shoulders and gave me a gentle shake. “You’re in New York. There’s a late-night just about anything you could want. And, yeah, I could do with some chocolate, too.”

“It’s the endorphins,” Owen said. “There’s something about the elfsong that hits you there, and chocolate helps restore you. I’m surprised that it hit Katie that way. Maybe there’s a physiological effect even without the magical impact.”

“Nah, I always want chocolate when I stay up too late,” I said.

Rod closed his phone and returned it to his pocket. “The car will be here in about five minutes,” he reported. “It’ll be easier if we meet them on the corner. This is a one-way street going the wrong way from where the car is now.”

We began walking down the street. Sets must have ended at some of the other clubs nearby, as people were streaming out of doorways. So, this was the infamous New York nightlife, or at least one slice of it. I had to admit it wasn’t bad. I wouldn’t want this every weekend, but it didn’t hurt to leave the house every so often.

When we reached the corner where we were supposed to meet our limo, quite the crowd had already gathered, and I realized they were in line to get into a club rather than coming out of one. I couldn’t begin to imagine a nightlife that started at midnight. Suddenly, someone just appeared in the line, near the head.

“Hey, where did you come from?” the person in line behind him shouted.

The line jumper turned, waved a hand, and the man’s shouts went silent. His date ran at the line jumper, but he repelled her with a wave of his hand. The onlookers gasped. It looked like we had another incident of public magic, right in front of us. This wouldn’t look good for Owen.

Several more people in line shouted protests about the line jumping and whatever had been done to the first person to complain, and soon we had the beginnings of a brawl. Owen instinctively moved to intervene in the scuffle, but I grabbed his arm and held him back. “No, don’t do anything that hints that you might be even thinking about using magic,” I told him.

He started to protest, but a bright flash of light interrupted him. It was followed by several more, from various angles—camera flashes. I wasn’t sure there was anything happening at the moment that would look truly magical when photographed, but I was glad that any pictures would show Owen standing well away, not doing anything that even remotely looked like performing a spell.

Rod and Philip were under less suspicion, and they moved to take action, but Marcia stood in front of them. “No, let’s handle this a better way,” she said. “Gemma?”

Gemma joined her. “Yeah, we’ve got this.” The two of them approached the scuffle. “Whoa, guys, what’s all this?” Gemma asked, tossing her hair over her shoulder and fluttering her eyelashes at the men.

“Yeah, what are you guys doing?” Marcia added.

The men turned to see a leggy brunette who could have been a model and an elegant blonde. In their current state of inebriation, the men didn’t seem able to concentrate on more than one thing at a time, and a man who’d tried to cut in line lost out to attractive women. “Huh?” one of the men said.

The guy who’d tried to cut started to object, but apparently realized that he was getting what he wanted. The others had forgotten to object to him stealing a place in line. For a moment, I worried that he’d try to continue the fight. He bounced around on the balls of his feet, like a sparring boxer, and I felt the magic power building as he prepared to strike. I rushed to get in between him and my friends, since if he attacked using magic, it would do me no harm. I wasn’t sure what he did, but I certainly felt the blast of magic hit me. I forced myself not to react. I imagined he must be wondering what went wrong, since he probably had no idea I was magically immune.

The other men in the line surely felt the magic, too, but since nothing had happened, they didn’t have anything to react to, and they were distracted by Gemma. She’d engaged them in conversation about the club, the band that was playing, and whether they were any good. I still noticed some camera flashes going off, but there wasn’t anything

to take pictures of right now, just me standing still while a man faced me with his hands held in front of him.

The line jumper grew hot under the collar about being more or less ignored. That told me he was in this to make a scene, not to get into the club sooner. Clenching his fists, he summoned more power, and I felt another wave of magic hit from behind, where Rod, Philip, and Owen seemed to have put up some kind of magical shield. I couldn't see them doing it. They all looked like they were just standing there, glaring at the troublemaker, but if you knew magic, you knew they were doing something.

The line began moving again, more smoothly now, and the guy had to decide if he wanted to get into the club or if he wanted to keep making a scene. He moved with the line, heading into the club. I made sure to get a good look at his face so I'd recognize him if I saw him again. He didn't look at all familiar. He wasn't someone I'd encountered at work or through any related magical activities. I wondered if any of the guys recognized him.

Once all the parties involved were inside, I asked, "Do we need to go in and make sure nothing else happens?"

"I figure it's the club's problem now," Rod said.

"Should we alert the magical authorities?" Philip asked.

"Well, it was a public use of magic," Owen said. "And we noticed it, so there could be trouble for us if we don't report it."

"On the other hand, it was pretty petty as magic goes, and here comes our car," Rod said.

"Maybe we could call our security people, and they can take care of notifying the authorities," I suggested as a compromise. I wasn't taking any chances of Owen getting in trouble with the Council. Once we were in the limo, I called Sam and reported the situation and the location, along with a description of the magic user, in case Sam wanted to keep an eye on him. I figured that would satisfy the Council while keeping us from being entangled.

But I cared a lot less whether some loser used magic to cut in line at a nightclub than I cared how far the story had spread. I hoped that the nonmagical intervention would keep it from becoming a big story. It was hardly worth sensationalizing. Then again, I had a feeling that the guy had wanted to start a magical fight and had only backed down because his agenda would have been obvious if he got what he wanted and still kept fighting. That, combined with the possibility that one of the anti-magic people was hanging out in a magical club, was highly suspicious. Maybe it wasn't just that people were noticing magic. Maybe magical people were trying to get noticed.

The next morning, I borrowed Marcia's laptop and checked out the magic-watching blogs. The story was all over them. Most of the photos

were blurry, and I was relieved to note that we didn't show up in any of them. Nothing we'd done had been worth taking pictures of, at least not as proof that magic exists. One photo captured the moment the woman was pushed back. She looked like she was flying backward without anyone nearby seeming to have pushed her. It was rather iffy as proof of magic use went, but I could see where it might raise questions.

Marcia leaned over my shoulder to peer at the screen. "There are really people out there looking for magic?" she asked.

"Looks like it."

"If I didn't know they were right, I'd say they were crazy."

"That's what we're counting on."

"And it's really bad for magical people to do stuff that normal people can see as magic?"

"Yeah. Their society is based on keeping magic a secret. Imagine what would happen if everyone knew magic worked, but only a certain group of people born with the power could use it."

"Probably lots of fear and hate. A lot of people would think having magic was an unfair advantage and would try to find a way to eliminate it, I guess. There might be some trying to bribe, blackmail, or coerce magical people into working for them. So, yeah, I can see the point."

"What I find interesting is that the people looking out for magic manage to report on every little incident."

She sat across from me at the kitchen table, where I was working. "I suppose that is odd. Are there that many people looking for magic?"

"That's what I'm wondering. Either there are so many people looking for magic and aware of where to report it that there's always someone present when anything happens, no matter where or when it happens, or it's all being staged."

"Either way, it sounds like a potentially bad situation."

"If there are that many people becoming aware of magic, we've got a big problem. But it's also scary if it's being staged, if the people using magic know where one of these reporters will be and make a point of doing magic in front of them."

"You think magical people are doing this on purpose?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. It's just one possibility, but I feel like I have to consider it."

"But why would magic people want to expose magic? You just said that's a big no-no."

"They might think they could take over the world once the secret is out, rather than being restricted. The current magical powers that be might lose some control."

"Oh," she said with a wince. "So you think the Magical Liberation

Front, or whatever they are, are in league with the magical watchdogs? Or maybe the magical watchdogs are a front for the Magical Liberation Front?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out. I don't know who any of these people are or what their agenda really is, and I don't know what kind of threat they pose. Maybe they're in league, or maybe they're using each other without them knowing they're being used."

She took a long sip from her coffee cup before saying, "You know, you may just be reading more into this than there really is. Given everything you've dealt with, it's perfectly reasonable for you to see conspiracies everywhere, but it's possible that the magic watchers happen to be at all these magical incidents because they've identified magical people who are prone to using magic in public, and they're stalking those people."

I looked across the table at her over the top of the laptop screen. "That's a good point. I mean, if you saw someone use what you were pretty sure was magic, you'd want to learn more about that person. You might start following them, which means you'd be there the next time they used magic. If there are only a few people slipping and using magic in ways that get noticed, whether or not it's on purpose, it's easy enough to keep track of them."

"See, probably a perfectly simple explanation, so you don't have to get all worried about it when you need to be planning a wedding."

"What about planning a wedding?" said Gemma, who'd just come through the front door, a yoga mat under her arm.

"When you say the word 'wedding,' it summons her," I said to Marcia. To Gemma, I said, "Nothing, just making sure that these incidents aren't going to distract me from my wedding planning. It's probably nothing." To emphasize the point, I closed the laptop.

I really should have been able to let it go. Marcia's explanation made perfect sense. There probably wasn't any kind of conspiracy to expose magic coming from within the magical world. It was just a few jerks making trouble for everyone else and getting noticed by the kind of people who actually paid attention to what was going on around them. That artificially amplified the impression of magic run amok. Ninety-nine and probably about nine tenths percent of New Yorkers never saw anything that looked like magic. I'd merely focused on the tiny percentage who did.

And I managed to get through the rest of the day without worrying about it, though I couldn't help but check on the magic-watching blogs that night. The nightclub incident hadn't struck me as being worth much notice. It hadn't even been splashy magic. But still, the story had spread to all the sites, with more photos. It seemed to me that you had to be trying hard to believe to work up any excitement

about this incident. Maybe that's what the tabloid guys needed to do: set up boring magical incidents to publicize. I wondered if they had an online presence.

After church Sunday, I stopped by a bodega to pick up a newspaper, but then I noticed the rack of tabloids. Were they reporting any of the magic incidents? Impulsively, I bought a copy of each one. I couldn't help but wonder which was the paper produced by magical people. Would I be able to tell? When I got home, I spread them on the dining table to study. One was more celebrity-driven and didn't have the "news of the weird" stuff. The others all had similar content, including pieces about the bus incident. I couldn't tell which one was the story written using my interview. The MSI guys apparently knew their stuff. They must have written something indistinguishable from a real tabloid. Two of the papers had stories suggesting that there might be dragons in Central Park, so even that didn't confirm which paper was a magical plant.

"Ooh, mental junk food!" Nita exclaimed as she came in from her own shopping expedition with groceries. "Is there anything about who Leo's with now?"

I shoved the celebrity paper over to her. "Be my guest."

"I never had you pegged as being into this sort of thing," she said as she leaned over to scan the headlines.

"It's sort of for a work project," I said, glad that I hadn't mentioned anything about not working in marketing anymore. "We're considering a campaign with a 'trashy news' theme, so I'm getting ideas. And learning about the wide variety of strange beings spotted in American cities."

I might have spent the day in intense analysis of the tabloid press if Owen hadn't shown up with a picnic basket and a suggestion to take advantage of a nice spring day in the park. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to see the dragons for ourselves," I quipped.

"Dragons?" Owen asked.

"Tabloid story," I said.

"Really? Which paper was it in?" Nita asked.

I pointed out the pertinent ones. "We'd better sneak out before Gemma catches us and makes us work on the wedding plans."

He patted his picnic basket. "I have cake samples in here."

"What will we do with our lives when the wedding's over and we don't have to work planning into everything we do?"

"I can't wait to find out," he said, so earnestly it was rather endearing. I had to agree with him.

When we reached the park, we found a somewhat private spot under a tree and spread our blanket. Owen took a bakery box out of his basket and opened the lid to reveal a selection of cakes. "I got a

mix of traditional and nontraditional types,” he said. “Remember, we can make just about anything look like a wedding cake, so we’re not stuck with the usual white cake and white icing.”

“That can be good if you do it right, but I’m willing to consider other options,” I said as I picked up a fork.

While I was contemplating the Italian cream cake as an option, I noticed a group of kids trooping through the park nearby, led by adults dressed as wizards. The fact that they were actually dressed as wizards, pointy hats and all, suggested that they weren’t our kind of wizards, but I still pointed them out to Owen. “What’s going on over there?” I asked.

“Some kind of educational fun, I suppose,” he said, once he’d swallowed a bite of cake. “I’m not sure about the white chocolate.”

“It doesn’t really taste like chocolate,” I said. Then I groaned. “Oh, no.”

“What? I only put the carrot cake in as an option, but I agree that it’s not high on my list.”

“No, carrot cake is okay, though probably not for a wedding. Look who’s following the kids.” A man carrying a television camera on his shoulder came after the line of children, a woman walking alongside him. “The way things have been going lately, this means something weird and magical is going to happen at any moment.”

“There are probably news crews all over the city most of the time every day, and how many actual magical events have they captured?”

“Are you talking over time, or in the last week or so?”

“Okay, so we’ll keep our eyes open, and I won’t use magic.”

Something ran across my foot, and I barely stifled a squeal as I jerked out of the way. I looked, expecting a rat, but I saw one of the little magical creatures who lived in the park. “Shoo, go away, this is a bad time,” I said. There had been a brief moment when they’d worshiped me because I’d held a magical brooch, and they apparently hadn’t forgotten that. If I went into the park, I usually found myself with company. The last thing we needed right now was footage of strange creatures hitting the news. They were usually veiled from ordinary people, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

It was hard to focus on tasting the cake while I worried what disaster was likely to happen next—and it takes some serious worry to distract me from cake. The kids stopped to do some kind of activity that had been staged for them, and the cameraman circled them as they worked. The reporter talked to one of the leaders, scribbling notes in a small notepad as the leader spoke. I couldn’t help but scan the area for any potential threats.

There were several guys in hoodies nearby, but since it was a cool spring day, it seemed like half the people in the park were dressed the

same way. It didn't mean that the mysterious bus wizard was here and ready to cause trouble. A clump of bicycles came down the path that passed this section of lawn, and while packs of feral bikers were often a menace in the park, that wasn't unusual enough to make the news. Everyone knew that you had to get out of their way or else you'd get spandex poisoning. You were usually safe from them as long as you stayed off the pavement.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the pack veered off the path and onto the grass, heading straight for the kids. They all moved as one, staying in formation behind their leader, but they moved at the same time as their leader rather than waiting for him to move and then following him. It was like they were all on the same wavelength. I was surprised they were able to keep going at any speed riding on the grass. "Owen," I said softly.

He was already standing. "I see them."

I tugged on his hand, trying to pull him back down to me. "Don't! You could get in trouble."

"Only if I do anything they notice, and they're heading for those kids." His hand slipped out of my grasp as he hurried across the lawn, shouting and waving his arms.

The adults with the kids finally looked up and noticed the pack of bicycles bearing down on them. They tried to herd the kids out of the path, but the bikes veered to follow them. This was definitely magic, and I could feel it. But who was doing it?

I got up and ran after Owen. He was pulling together a spell, which rendered my sense of magic useless. Feeling his magic right next to me made it impossible for me to detect any other sources of magic, so I ran across the lawn, as though heading for the kids, but all the while trying to detect the tingle of magic. I was pretty sure I felt something from one of the hoodie guys I'd noticed earlier, which somewhat vindicated me in my suspicions.

The sense of magic grew stronger, like the spell had intensified. I glanced back toward the kids and saw that the cameraman was now shooting the approaching bikers, who relentlessly pursued the children. The front wheels of the bikes began to rise, but just then a couple of the bikers seemed to hit an obstacle in the grass, and they fell over, bringing down the bikes near them in a hopeless tangle. The adults with the kids took advantage of the opportunity to flee with their charges.

I heard a muffled curse behind me and turned to see the hoodie guy running away. I thought about running after him, but I'm not exactly athletic, so I had no chance of catching him, and I wasn't sure what I could do if I did. I'd seen enough of his face to be sure he was the same guy I saw at the club, and I was fairly sure I'd recognize him

if I saw him again. Instead, I joined Owen, who'd headed for the bicycle pileup and was helping the fallen bikers. Much to my relief, the news crew had followed the kids instead of lingering to see what happened to the bikers. It would have only been news if they'd hit the kids, and a bike wreck wasn't exactly the stuff that Pulitzers are made of.

I helped one of the riders get to his feet and pick up his bike. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess." He looked around, blinking. "How did we get off the path?"

"I guess you guys weren't paying attention," I said, feeling a bit bad about letting them think it was their fault.

Once they were all upright and were sure no one was injured, aside from maybe some scrapes and bruises, they returned to the path and resumed their ride. "I probably shouldn't have wrecked them, but it seemed like the best way to contain the situation," Owen said once they were gone. "I hope that doesn't count as using magic to do harm."

"It was a good thing you took action when you did because they were about to go full-on E.T., only without the moon to fly in front of. And I'm pretty sure it's the same guy who levitated the bus, so he must have only one trick up his sleeve."

"I don't get what they're trying to do," Owen said, frowning, as we returned to our blanket. "Are the same people setting up these events and then resolving them with magic so it will be noticed?"

"If they're trying to get caught doing good with magic, then maybe they're trying to go public in a way that looks heroic," I suggested. "On the other hand, I think this is the guy I saw in the club, and if the guy he was with was the guy I saw looking for bus witnesses, he was working for one of those 'magic is evil' blogs. If they have a magical person working for them, wouldn't they be able to create definitive proof without going through all this fuss?"

"That's if the person running that group knows she has magical people working for her. They may have their own agenda. Maybe they're trying to change her mind about magic by doing heroic things with it."

"Which you foiled today, and rather nicely. I don't think the reporter thought anything of it."

Even so, I turned on the late news that night. It was the usual litany of crime, politics, and accidents (and sometimes all of the above in one story). The story about the educational children's program in the park didn't contain a single mention of the near-miss by runaway bicycles. I was about to change the channel to a rerun of an old sitcom when a story came on that made me sit up and take notice.

Bystanders alleged that the windows in a car dealership had vanished and a car had floated out of the showroom before the windows reappeared again. The story was so wild, I was surprised the TV station had given it any credibility. It must have been a slow news day, I thought. Or maybe they were treating it as a quirky human interest feature—people say the darnedest things.

But then they showed video, first from the dealership's own security cameras. That was fuzzy and black-and-white, but I couldn't think of what other explanation I could give for a car floating out of a dealership with no one behind the wheel. Magnets?

That wasn't all. There was also bystander video, shot on a digital camera. That footage was sharp, so it was obvious when the window vanished and returned, and we could clearly see the car float out and drive away.

Unless we could find an illusionist who would take credit for the stunt and return the car, it looked like the magical cat was well and truly out of the bag.

I immediately called Owen. "Have you been watching the news?" I asked.

"No, why? Did they say something about the bike attack?"

"Worse than that. Someone made a car fly out of a dealership window, and they got good video." I described what I'd seen on the news.

"Are you sure?" He sounded skeptical.

"You're not telling me that you, a wizard, don't believe in magic, are you?"

"I'm not saying anything about the viability of magic. I'm just saying I'm not sure that this sounds like magic. It's more like a publicity stunt. How are they framing it in the coverage?"

"They're treating it more like an interesting oddity than like a serious story."

"Then maybe it'll blow over. I don't anticipate the authorities banging on our doors. But stay on top of it, of course."

"That was the plan," I said. "But it really is looking more and more like either a lot of magical people are suddenly getting really careless, or they're actively trying to get caught. I'm as worried about that as I am about magic being exposed."

"Yeah, that could be a problem," he said. I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head over the phone. He was thinking about it, and hard.

"So?" I prompted.

"So, we'll stay on top of it. You've got this."

It occurred to me that this time, it actually was my responsibility. Always before, I'd sort of fallen into this kind of work, either from being at the wrong (or right) place at the wrong (or right) time, from being targeted, or from trying to help Owen. Now, it really was up to me and my colleagues to deal with the crisis. I had to admit that while I liked my day-to-day work much better now, it had been nice to get to swoop in and deal with something without it being my real job. The consequences had always been life or death, but now my job was at stake, as well.

The next morning, I woke early after not having slept much and gathered an armload of newspapers on my way to work. I couldn't do much more than skim headlines on the subway and, much to my relief, there were no "MAGIC IS REAL!" headlines. It was possible that the incident had happened too late to make the morning papers, and unless it really did definitively prove the existence of magic, a car

disappearing from a dealership probably wasn't "Stop the presses!" material. I wouldn't relax on the mainstream news front until I saw what was in the next day's papers.

After giving the papers a cursory skim once I got to the office, I checked the regular news sites. The disappearing car was mentioned on a few of them, but in the human-interest feature category rather than as real news. That was something of a relief. Next, I read the magic-watching blogs, and any idea of letting it go went right out the window. There was an editorial on the Abigail Williams blog about the danger magic posed to society. It referred to the disappearing car and the nightclub line scuffle, but went on to discuss other incidents. Some of them I recognized from the last couple of years when rogue wizard Phelan Idris had been running amok. Others I'd seen mentioned on the blog. There were a few that were news to me.

"Although there have been one or two cases in which magic was used to benefit others," the editorial said, "magic is more likely, by far, to be used for underhanded purposes. Magicians force others to do their will, hide their dastardly deeds behind a veil of illusion, and use their powers to cheat and swindle. Something has to be done to put a stop to this. From now on, even if we don't get evidence of the magic itself, we want photos of people you believe have done magic. We'll post these so that everyone can beware of these dangerous people."

I was particularly worried about the line mentioning hiding magic behind a veil of illusion. I cross-referenced the incidents mentioned in the post with our internal incident reports and, as I feared, there were some when no one else should have noticed the magic. I'd even been involved in a couple, and I was fairly certain that they'd been hidden from ordinary people. That suggested they had a magical immune in their midst, and that put all magical people, even the responsible ones who hid their magic from the world, at risk.

"Uh oh," I said to myself. I copied and pasted the post into an e-mail to Sam and Merlin. If there was ever a time to bypass the chain of command, this was it. Not long afterward, I got summoned to an emergency meeting in Merlin's office. I supposed the car stunt was big enough that the "we haven't been exposed in centuries" argument no longer held up.

A representative from the Council was there—fortunately, not Jabez Jones. It was Mack, an old friend of Owen's foster parents. He was generally pretty reasonable, for a Council type.

"It seems we have multiple issues here," Merlin said. "First, we have a magical person who's openly using magic to commit criminal acts and allowing his acts to be caught on camera. Second, we have nonmagical people who are aware of this activity. It was reported on the local news."

“I’ve done some skimming around on news sites, and so far, most people seem to be taking it as some kind of stunt, like something a stage magician would do,” I said. “Of course, the people who already believe in magic are all over it.”

Minerva Felps, from the Prophets and Lost department, said, “We’re not really getting a changed vibe here. It’s not affecting the general public, only these few people.”

“I’m suspicious about how the people who are trying to prove magic exists just happened to be there to catch perfectly framed footage of the event,” Mack said. “That doesn’t look like ordinary bystander stuff. He had a clear shot, with the car in the middle of the frame, and he got it all from start to finish. It’s hard to imagine that someone looking out for this sort of thing just happened to stumble across it, just happened to have a video camera out and ready even before something happened, and just happened to shoot it perfectly.”

“We’ve been wondering about that,” I said. “They always seem to have someone there to get footage, though it usually isn’t this good. One possibility is that the magical watchdogs are stalking people they believe use magic. That gives them a better chance of being in the right place and at the right time when someone does something. But, yeah, being set up to frame it perfectly does make you wonder. I’m really starting to think that magical people are involved. I know at least some of the situations were set up magically to then allow someone else to resolve them magically.” I hadn’t officially reported the incident in the park because I wanted to keep Owen out of it, but it fit the pattern.

“I can tell you, the Council is having kittens,” Mack said, wincing as though at a painful memory. “We haven’t come this close to public exposure in centuries.”

“It’s worse than that,” I said. “There was an editorial on one of these sites mentioning that magical people use illusion to hide their magic. If they have an immune . . .” I couldn’t help but shudder, and the wizards did, likewise. I couldn’t tell with Sam, but he was made of sterner stuff.

“I’m thinking our people should lie low until this blows over,” Rod said. He was in charge of personnel at the company. In a regular company, it might have been “human resources,” but not all of our staff were human. “I’ll draft an internal memo warning people not to engage in any public magic activity, not even under veiling.”

“What will people like fairies, elves, and other magical creatures do?” I asked. “That’s a little harder to hide.”

“Yeah, I can’t exactly ground most of my team,” Sam said. “Without our air power, keepin’ track of things gets harder, and if they can see through veils and they’re willing to admit to what they

see, that's gonna be a problem. Something tells me that our usual fallback of people refusing to say they're seeing flying gargoyles isn't going to work here."

"I say we ride this one out, play it cool for the time being," Minerva said. "It'll probably blow over. I'm sensing a stock market drop next week, and there's a high chance of a political scandal that should knock this off the news radar entirely."

"Unless someone is trying to get attention, in which case I doubt they'll just give up," I said. "Do we know of any factions that are actively campaigning to get magic out in the open?" I knew there were all kinds of factions in the magical world, from old-school magical puritans to magical mobsters.

"There are a few groups we've been watching," Mack said. "It's hard to tell how organized they are, whether it's a few nuts or an actual movement. We've brought in some of the individuals we know of for questioning. So far, it doesn't seem like they're involved."

We didn't come to any definitive conclusions from the meeting, just a plan to keep doing what we'd been doing and keep an eye on events. I went back to my office to check the blogs again. Discussion was heated. Surprisingly, the clear, perfectly framed video was seen as less credible than all the Bigfoot-quality stuff that had been posted earlier. As Mack had said, people found it suspicious as bystander video, which suggested that it might have been faked.

But then I saw that the alleged photographer had posted in response to these challenges. He even included additional video that hadn't been shown on the air, from before the incident.

As we'd suspected, the photographer was supposedly following someone, shooting as he went. I couldn't tell anything about the subject. He wore a nondescript windbreaker with a hood that was pulled up around his face, and he was being shot from behind at first. He stopped at the dealership and looked around. The photographer ducked out of the way, and for a split second he got the guy's face in the frame. The subject raised his hands, and the photographer quickly panned around, just in time to catch the window vanishing.

I backed up the video to the best shot of the guy's face, took a screen capture, and sent that to Rod. He knew just about everyone in the magical world, so there was a good chance he could identify him. While I was at it, I sent it to Sam, so he and his crew would know who to look out for.

I had the strongest feeling that there was something more we should be doing. I just wasn't entirely sure what that was.

The next morning, I was collecting newspapers from the racks in front of the Union Square subway station when I heard Owen's voice behind me. "I didn't realize you were so into current events."

“I’m into how certain current events are covered. You read Mandarin, don’t you? I might be able to figure out the Spanish.”

“We also have certain translation resources.”

Which probably meant spells, and I hoped they were more accurate than the Internet translation services. “Oh, good. Here.” I thrust an armload of papers on him and continued my buying spree. “Oops, do you have a quarter?” He twitched his hand in a way I recognized, and I grabbed his wrist before he could complete the spell. “No. Not now. Reach into your pocket like a normal person.”

I’d never thought of Owen as someone who casually used magic to make his life easier, and he did use it far less than most magical people. If you saw him at home, you might not realize he was a wizard unless you noticed some of the more esoteric titles on his bookshelf. But he had some little habits that he probably didn’t think twice about and that now might be used as evidence of a vast magical conspiracy.

With a weary sigh, he shifted the papers to his left arm and fished a quarter out of his pocket. I took it from him. “Thank you.”

I waited until I got to my office to read the papers, even though I was anxious to see what might be in there. If the floating car was going to be covered in the newspaper, it would be in today’s editions, along with perhaps more in-depth reporting than there was likely to be on television.

Once I had a big cup of coffee, I sat down at my desk and started searching. The Times devoted a paragraph in a local news roundup to the incident, with a lot of words like “allegedly,” “supposedly,” and “bystanders said.” The word “magic” didn’t come up at all. Police were reported as refusing to speculate. That was a relief. I’d know we really had something to worry about when the Times reported on magic.

The tabloids had varying coverage, some with stills taken from the video. Without motion, the pictures looked fake. I doubted I’d have believed them if I hadn’t seen the video and didn’t know that such things were actually possible. The fact that the stories were alongside others like “Princess Diana Not Dead—Abducted by Aliens” and “Elvis—Madonna’s Latest Lover?” didn’t make them much more believable.

I leaned back in my chair with a heartfelt, “Whew.” We’d really dodged a bullet there. I dropped the foreign-language papers off to be translated and hoped that this would be the end of it. Maybe when something this big failed to get any traction, the magic hunters would give up.

Unfortunately, this proved to be only the beginning of the campaign, and Abigail Williams had gone from merely wanting to expose magic to being violently opposed, calling for the government

to take action. The Times was a little too staid to print that wacky a letter to the editor, but other newspapers in the coming days ran letters from concerned readers who demanded an investigation.

One local news channel had a stage magician walk through the car “trick” and explain how it might have been done, but he was unable to replicate it in a way that looked at all realistic. The stolen car was later pulled over on a freeway in Connecticut, but the person driving it had a genuine-looking sales receipt from a dealership. That aroused suspicion that the dealership had staged the whole thing as a publicity stunt, and the story rapidly died in the conventional press.

The anti-magic underground, however, was gaining strength. On my way to the subway station one morning, I got handed two different fliers about magical issues. One merely pointed to the blogs I already knew about and said it was “the truth they don’t want you to know.” The other was more strident, mentioning a vast magical cabal running the world behind the scenes and claiming that the media was stifling all proof of magic.

Meanwhile, magical people were growing tense. Fairies folded their wings up under coats when out in public. Wizards barely used magic, even at home. I quit teasing Owen for his workaholic ways. The more time he spent in the office, the less time he could be anywhere near any public magic event. So far, the Council hadn’t said anything more about him, and I’d noticed that Merlin left him out of all the meetings on the topic, but I worried that he’d make a convenient scapegoat. He’d been present for far too many of these incidents, enough for me to worry he was being targeted. He had a lot of enemies in the magical world, and if magical people were actually behind this, he could be in danger.

And yet, in spite of the caution in much of the magical community, the stories kept coming. Every day, there would be a new post or two on the anti-magic blogs, showing what they believed to be proof of magic. Even knowing what I knew, I didn’t think it looked like proof of anything. I didn’t recognize any of the alleged magic users, and the pictures didn’t look anything like any real spells I’d ever seen cast.

Bringing Owen pictures of alleged spells became part of my daily routine. “What about this batch?” I asked one afternoon about a week later as I dropped a stack of printouts on his desk, on top of the ancient tome he was studying. “Any real magic here?”

He bent over, squinting, then shook his head. “It’s hard to tell from a still photo. It could have caught a transitional moment, but I don’t think any of these gestures are actually part of any spell I’m aware of.” Looking up at me, he added, “That’s good, right? If they’re having to make stuff up, that means they aren’t really on to anything, and it’s bound to hurt their credibility.”

"I'm not sure the truth is likely to slow any of these true believers down much," I said, "especially since they're actually right."

"Not about us ruling the world. We aren't allowed to go into politics."

"What about economics? You use your prescience to play the stock market."

"Only a little," he said. "Probably no more than most people who have solid instincts, and I back it up with research. I'm also not using magic to manipulate the market."

"I'm not sure these people would see the difference. To them, it's enough that you have advantages other people don't have and can never have."

"They haven't started posting pictures of known magic users, have they?"

"Not other than these pictures of magic allegedly in use. You're sure you don't recognize any of them?"

"I don't know every wizard."

"But surely if we pooled the knowledge of everyone in this company, that's bound to cover the majority of magical people in the city, whether as friends, family, or customers." I picked up the photos. "I think I'll see if Rod can distribute them and learn anything."

"He's probably a better bet than I am. He's much more social."

Rod put together an internal site and sent out another memo. By the end of the day, only one person had been identified. I got one of the computer wizards—in this case, the term was meant literally—to try to trace back the sources of the reports. Trish was in my office when I got the call that the computer wizards had made no headway on identifying the sources of reports or comments.

I ran my hands through my hair and groaned. "I don't get it," I said. "I can't tell whether we're dealing with people who hate magic and want it exposed or who use magic and want it exposed."

"Doesn't it kind of work out the same way?" Trish asked.

"Yeah, but we need to fight it in different ways. You deal with people afraid of magic in a totally different way than you deal with people who want to be able to use magic openly, so they're forcing the issue."

She frowned. "You're really taking this personally, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

"The magical people are getting a bit paranoid, but you're acting like you're on a one-woman crusade, and it doesn't even affect you directly."

"Well, the Council did go after Owen about being near the public magic use. And what happens to him and so many of my other friends if this gets out?"

“I think it’s going to take a lot more than a floating Audi to make the general public and the government believe in magic. Hey, do you think there’s an X-files section in the FBI, only about magic instead of aliens?”

“Apparently, there is a secret division in the government that deals with magical matters.”

“So the government already knows about it. Don’t you think they’ll try to squash this little crusade?”

“I think the thing is, I relate to these magic watchdog people,” I said. “I remember how I felt when I was seeing strange things around town that no one else seemed to notice. There were times when I thought I was going crazy. At other times, I felt like a hick who wasn’t cut out for living in New York because I was all agog over things New Yorkers just ignored. It made such a huge difference to me when I learned that magic was real, and I was immune to it. It explained everything. The universe made sense again. Some of these people may be dealing with the same thing in their own way, and I feel bad if someone is taking advantage of them.”

“That could be what’s going on here,” she said, nodding. “What do you bet that one of the people behind the magic watchdog group is a magical immune who got tired of feeling crazy or being treated like he or she was crazy when no one else saw what he or she saw? I definitely recognize the impulse. You want to grab everyone around you and say, ‘Hey, did you see that?’ It didn’t cross my mind to start a blog, but it’s not an irrational response to reach out to other people who might see things so you can validate each other. And then maybe there’s someone else out there using them. They may not know they’re being used, or they could be in on it.”

“I think there’s something to finding out who’s behind this and what their motive is,” I said. “I know the person I talked to at the bridal sale wasn’t an immune, but maybe she wasn’t the boss. She may have just been passing out cards. If it is an immune trying to validate her experiences, we may be able to deal with it all a different way, and that would stop any magical activist from using them.”

“And we might get a new recruit in the process. Are you thinking undercover mission?”

“We are pretty ideally suited for this work, being immune and able to validate what this person is seeing. It wouldn’t be too hard for us to find magic to report on to earn trust, since we work for a magical company.”

“Do you think the boss will go for it?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

There were some situations in which it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission, but I was new to this department, and I

didn't want to get off on the wrong foot—or wing—with Sam by going rogue. We went outside and found him on the awning, where he kept an eye on the street outside. Trish and I outlined our idea and our proposed plan.

"I doubt it's too risky," I concluded. "After all, they're after magic users, and we're not magical. They don't seem to be into physical violence, and there have been no signs that they've made anyone disappear."

"And how do you propose to go about infiltrating this organization?" he asked.

"There was an e-mail address on the card. I can try that."

He flapped and refolded his wings. "Lemme run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes."

"Seriously, Sam? What's the risk?" I asked.

"That you could be traced to this company. Which, so far, no one seems to know about. You'd think if they knew there was a massive magical corporation, that would have shown up in their writings. If you get caught and exposed, your employer may be, too."

"Surely it's not that easy," I argued. "I have that fake employer name to put on things like credit applications. I hope our front is strong enough to survive a check."

"As I said, I'll see what the boss has to say."

"And by boss, you mean Merlin, not Owen, right?"

"Palmer's not in the chain of command on this one."

"Good." Owen had a lot of faith in my abilities, but after my last undercover assignment, I suspected he'd be perfectly happy for me to never leave my office. He was one to talk, considering the danger he'd been in so many times since I'd known him. I was more likely to be rescuing him than the other way around.

"What do you think the boss will say?" Trish asked as we returned to the security office.

"I have no idea. I don't get the impression that Sam is going to be much of an advocate."

Much to my surprise, I got the green light. Now I just had to think of a way to meet up with these people in person. I sent an e-mail—under a fake identity—to the address on the business card the woman at the bridal sale had given me. I used that same identity to post a few comments on the blog, along the lines of, "Hey, I've seen something like that happening. Didn't realize it was magic. That explains so much!"

Owen and I went out to dinner that night. I hadn't yet told him about my assignment, and it was the sort of thing that was difficult to discuss in public. Still, he knew something was up. "You're awfully excited."

“Let’s just say I got an interesting new task at work.”

“It’s not what I think it is, is it?”

“No, I’m not redecorating the ladies’ restrooms,” I teased with a grin.

“You’re dealing with those people?”

“Not yet, but I may try to. Trish, too. We have a theory that the person behind all this might be like us, just needing some validation, or to feel sane again, and if we can deal with that, if there is someone out there taking advantage of that for their own agenda, that may foil their plan. And don’t tell me to be careful. That makes it sound like you don’t have any faith in me.”

“I’ll have to remember that the next time you tell me to be careful.”

“With me, it’s more about talking to strangers. With you, it tends to be possibly blowing up the city.”

“Speaking of which, did you have any thoughts on wedding party favors?”

“I don’t really see what that has to do with blowing up the city. And, wow, a groom who’s actually interested in wedding plans. You really are a unicorn, aren’t you?”

He turned slightly pink, but shrugged and said, “More like I don’t want to be nagged mercilessly by your roommate who has appointed herself our wedding planner.”

Talking about party favors was far safer public discourse than magic was, and although I’d teased Owen, I was apparently interested enough that I didn’t even think about my new assignment until I neared the subway station the next morning and ran into someone handing out fliers.

While most New Yorkers had developed techniques for avoiding those things, I generally liked taking them. Most of them were for bargain shoe sales or comedy shows, but you never knew what you’d get. In my first year or so in the city, I’d managed to have something resembling a social life outside my apartment just through discounts and coupons from fliers. Besides, I felt kind of sorry for the people trying to hand them out. They needed a moment or two of success every so often.

This flier wasn’t a coupon for a free drink at a comedy club or an announcement of a designer shoe sale. It was from one of the anti-magic groups, not just giving a blog address, but announcing a public meeting.

I folded it carefully and put it in my purse, grinning to myself. This looked like my chance.

When I got to work, I stopped by Trish's office and handed her the flier. "Are you free this evening?" I asked.

As she read the flier, her eyebrows rose. "Wow, meeting about this sort of thing in public. Even if we didn't have an assignment to try to infiltrate them, I'd have to go to this, just to see what kind of people showed up."

"Yeah, I'm guessing it'll be an interesting crowd. Or not a crowd, judging by the number of these fliers that were littering the ground around the station."

"Watch—it'll be maybe five people, and all of them are magical people curious to know what dirt the organizers have. We should plan a strategy. Do we go together or go separately and pretend we don't know each other?"

I pondered that. "On the one hand, if we go separately, we can let them think their fliers got a wider reach than they did. On the other hand, if we go together, we could play it like friends doing it on a lark or dare. Do we want them to think we're serious about this magic stuff, or do we want them to have to convince us?"

"And do we let on about the magic immunity—not knowing what it is, of course, just having seen more than your average person?"

"Or we could split the difference—be friends, one of us dragging the other because one of us sees stuff and wants to convince her friend that it's real."

"Okay, that's good," she said, nodding. "So, who's the skeptic and who's the believer?"

"Flip a coin?"

We ended up deciding that since I'd received the flier, I would be the one who thought she saw things and had dragged her friend to the meeting. Trish would be the one going out of curiosity and fairly certain her own worldview would be validated by this meeting.

We clued Sam in on our plan so he could have backup ready in case we needed it, but I warned him not to have gargoyles nearby, in case we were right about the involvement of magical immunes. They wouldn't be able to get a photo of a magically veiled gargoyle that anyone else could see, but we didn't want a meeting full of magical immunes to be confronted with something obviously magical.

The meeting was in the basement of an old church that seemed to be dealing with declining membership by renting out its meeting rooms to all comers. The board outside the room mentioned meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, a genealogy society, a Parents without

Partners group, and a folk dancing club. This meeting was listed as “Raising Community Awareness of Unusual and Unlikely Events.”

I didn’t have to fake being eager and a bit nervous to get into character. I really had no idea what I was getting into. We were several minutes early, and the room was just about empty, aside from the people at the front of the room who were apparently running the meeting. I didn’t recognize any of them. I’d thought maybe I’d see the woman from the bridal brawl or the puppy from the bus, but they weren’t there.

“Oh, hey, they have cookies,” Trish remarked as we entered. “So it’s not a total loss.”

One of the people at the front must have heard her, for his head snapped around when she spoke, and he came down the aisle between the rows of chairs to greet us. I’d have pegged his age at maybe somewhere in the midforties, but it was hard to tell. He seemed like one of those people who was born middle-aged. He probably didn’t look much younger than this in high school, and he’d still look about this age when he was in his seventies. He wore a sweater vest over a dress shirt, but avoided being a total cliché by wearing no tie at all rather than a bow tie. I couldn’t tell whether his hair was thinning or just thin, and it was parted very carefully and slicked down. “Hi, welcome,” he said. “Are you here for the meeting?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, not having to fake my voice shaking slightly. “I got a flier at the subway station this morning.” I took it out of my purse and showed it to him. “This is the right place, isn’t it?”

“Yes, this is the place. Have you seen things?”

I gave a shaky little laugh. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on,” Trish said around a mouthful of cookie. “You’re always telling me about things you’ve seen.”

“I just, well, I hoped if I talked to other people, I might know whether or not I was crazy,” I said with a shrug.

“We don’t think you’re crazy,” the man said. “Help yourself to some refreshments, and we’ll get started soon.”

He returned to the front of the room, and Trish and I went to the refreshment table. As we selected from an assortment of store-bought cookies, Trish whispered, “Is this what you thought it would be?”

“Yes and no.” It was exactly what I thought might happen if people who thought they saw things tried to start a support group, but not at all what I expected of a serious anti-magic organization. I put a few cookies on a paper napkin, took a paper cup of punch, and we found seats near the middle of the room, on the side nearest the door, in case we needed to make a quick exit or slip out.

While I nibbled on a cookie, I tried to get a good read on the people at the front of the room. The man we’d spoken to didn’t really

fit in with the others. There was a tall, stern-looking woman in a no-nonsense business suit that made me think of the magical puritans we'd encountered the previous year and a scholarly looking man wearing black-rimmed glasses. I couldn't tell if it was his eyesight or his personality that made him seem to be glaring at the world. If these were the people behind the movement, then I was fairly certain my theory about magical immunes trying to make some sense out of the world was correct. They didn't strike me as people with a serious crusade.

A few more people entered the room. I had a feeling at least two of them were homeless people looking for an indoor place to sit down and get free refreshments. On the other hand, there was a high correlation between homelessness and mental illness, and people who are immune to magic often think they're crazy because of all the strange things they see that no one else sees, so there was a good chance that there were a number of perfectly sane magical immunes among the homeless population. I made a mental note to follow up on that. Maybe these guys weren't just here for the refreshments. They might be seeking knowledge. They filled their pockets with cookies, grabbed more cookies, and sat in the back row. Only one new arrival sat near the front.

It was past time for the meeting to have started, but the people in front were still talking among themselves, apparently going over a presentation. I suspected they were hoping more people would show up, but were running late or stuck in traffic. "I'm going for more cookies and a punch refill," Trish said as she stood. "Want anything?"

"No thanks," I said, shaking my head. I wasn't sure why I was so nervous, but the thought of putting anything else into my stomach made me queasy. There was something that seemed off about this whole situation, but I couldn't put my finger on anything in particular. Of course, having a meeting to discuss the fact that there was magic in the world was kind of odd. Part of my unease was due to the fact that I knew they were right, but I was hoping to prove them wrong or discourage them.

After about five more minutes with no one else entering the room, the man who'd spoken to us stepped forward, cleared his throat, and said, "Good evening. Thank you all for joining us."

Just as he began speaking, a woman darted into the room and took the seat on the other end of our row. She looked about thirty and wore jeans and a really baggy sweatshirt that she hunched into like she was a turtle trying to retreat into her shell. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight ponytail, and she wore no makeup at all, but with her light brown skin she had the coloring to pull that off without disappearing into the wallpaper. Her eyes were hidden behind thick

glasses with heavy tortoiseshell frames.

There was something familiar about her that gave me the nagging feeling I'd seen her before. I ran through my mental directory of people I knew. I was pretty sure she wasn't someone I knew from work, either at MSI or at my previous job. She wasn't a neighbor. Maybe she was just someone I saw frequently on the subway or in neighborhood restaurants and shops. She didn't look in my direction, so I figured I was safe. I'd only be in trouble if she recognized me and I couldn't come up with her name.

The speaker seemed to have lost his train of thought at the woman's arrival. He stopped speaking, cleared his throat, and started again. "Thank you all for coming tonight. I don't know how many of you joined us because you've always felt like there was something going on and how many were just curious, but I want to state up front that magic is real. It's all around us. Most people just don't notice it because we see what we want to see, what our minds can handle."

I couldn't help but remember the way I'd first heard that magic was real. I'd been given a similar speech, but it had been a little more convincing since I'd been in the conference room at MSI, which looked a lot like I imagined the chamber with the Round Table at Camelot would be, and it had been Merlin himself giving the speech, with visual aids provided by Owen. I wondered if we'd get a similar demonstration here.

Instead of doing magic tricks, the speaker turned on an overhead projector—the old-fashioned kind with transparent slides. "Wow, they're really kickin' it old school," Trish muttered under her breath.

The evidence of magic looked even less convincing on overhead projector slides than on a blog. Come to think of it, if these people were behind a blog, I'd have thought they'd have managed at least some kind of computer presentation. I had to wonder, was this meeting really about convincing us of the existence of magic, or was it a clever disinformation campaign? If I were trying to make people not believe in magic, this was probably exactly what I would put together. If the people attending the meeting saw this and classed all the magic watchdogs in the same group, then the "magic is real" movement would die out rapidly.

After a few more slides, the speaker said, "I know this doesn't look like much evidence, but it's really difficult to photograph magic in use." That was the most credible thing he'd said this whole time. "The odds are slim that anyone will have a camera out and ready to take a picture when someone happens to use magic, and most magic happens in the blink of an eye. By the time you have the chance to react, it's over. We also believe that magical people have a way to hide their magic from the world, so most magic will never be noticed by

ordinary people.”

If I hadn't been in on the secret, I'd have thought that was a rather convenient way to excuse the lack of evidence. It was a common thread in conspiracy theories—the lack of evidence is proof of a cover-up. Since I didn't know how much these people knew, I suspected in this case it was more of an excuse than an awareness of how magic worked.

“Some people see more than others,” the speaker went on. “We don't know if they just happen to be in the right place at the right time, keep their eyes open, and are willing to admit to what they see or if there's something special about these people that allows them to see past whatever is done to hide magic.”

Now he was getting close. Either they'd guessed pretty accurately, or someone in the know had set all this up. That was the thing about conspiracy theories. When dealing with them, you tended to find yourself thinking that way, too.

“Have any of you seen things you believe are magic?” the speaker asked.

Remembering the role I was playing, I tentatively raised my hand, barely lifting it above shoulder level. As I did so, I glanced around the room to see who else was raising a hand. The two homeless guys in the back looked at each other, shrugged, and raised their hands. None of the other attendees moved.

The speaker blinked rapidly at our response, but I couldn't tell if he was surprised by so few or so many. “Um, well, what have you seen?” he asked.

“You know, the usual,” one of the homeless guys said with a shrug. “Gargoyles flying over the city, fairies walking to work. That sort of thing.” His friend nodded in agreement, as though verifying what he said.

The speaker blinked even more rapidly. “Oh. Well. Um. Uh. That's . . . interesting.” There were a few soft coughs of the sort meant to stifle laughter from the rest of the audience. The woman at the end of our aisle raised her eyebrows above the rims of her glasses. The speaker turned to me. “And you, miss? I believe you had your hand up.”

I looked around, making sure he was speaking to me. “You know that weird fight that happened at the bridal sale a while ago? I was there,” I said. I decided not to let on that I might be immune to magic, not until I knew more about this group. “It was, well, weird. That was when I started looking into this magic stuff.”

The woman on our row snapped her head around to stare at me so quickly I was afraid she'd give herself whiplash. She hadn't given me a first look, let alone a second glance, before, but now she seemed to be

sizing me up, like she was trying to figure out whether she knew me from somewhere. That brought back my sense that I knew her. Oh, great, now I was going to either have to fake remembering her and find a way to avoid introducing her to Trish after the meeting or pretend not to see her and duck out quickly.

I'd almost forgotten about the speaker. "Okay, yes," he said, and I turned back toward the front to see him nodding and grinning in what looked like relief that I hadn't sounded as crazy as the homeless guy. "Our people have been looking into that event, and it's been the center of a lot of discussion among the magic watchers. That's the sort of thing we need all of you to be on the lookout for. The more of us who are out there looking for magic, the more likely it is that we'll eventually get real proof. Keep your eyes and your mind open, and you're sure to see more magic. Carry a camera with you at all times and be ready to take pictures or video. When we have enough evidence that there's no way to deny it or explain it, then we can take action and demand that the government do something about the magical people living among us. Does anyone else have a magical experience they'd like to share?"

He glanced around expectantly, but no one spoke. "Well, then, thank you for coming. Please stay in touch and let us know if you see magic. There are fliers on the table with information on how to submit reports. Feel free to hang around and enjoy the refreshments. Introduce yourselves to each other. We're all in this together, fighting on the same team."

Most of the attendees beat a hasty retreat to the exit. The woman on my row didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave, but she made no move to approach me. Since that imagined crisis didn't appear to be coming to pass, I lingered, hesitating. I was pretty sure the homeless guy who'd spoken and his friend were magical immunes, and if that was the case, we could help them. But I could hardly hand them a business card from MSI or even reassure them that the gargoyles were real here at this meeting without blowing my cover, and it was unlikely they had a way for me to contact them. The best I could do was go to the refreshment table under the guise of taking a cookie for the road while they loaded up on more and whisper, "You're not the only ones who sees the gargoyles. They're really there. You should speak to one sometime."

I then prepared to hurry out of the room and alert any security gargoyles to these guys so they could approach them, but I found my way blocked by the woman who'd been at the front of the room, the one who looked like one of the illustrations in the "dress for success" brochure they'd handed out to female students when I was in college.

"Hi, I'm Lara," she said with something I felt was intended to be a

smile, but her smiling muscles didn't get a lot of work, so it was a weak one.

I didn't want to give my name, but I worried that I'd get caught giving a fake one. "Kathleen," I said, giving the full name that no one ever used. That way, it was the truth, but perhaps less likely to get tracked back to me.

"I was intrigued by what you said about the bridal sale event, since we did get a lot of reports from that incident. Maybe you could submit your own report."

"I guess I could," I said, "but I don't have too much to add. I saw that woman on the news, talking about magic, and it explained so much, so I looked her up and found her blog, and that led me to the other ones, so I think I've seen every account of that incident, and they saw more than I did."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the woman at the end of the row edge closer, like she was eavesdropping. At the same time, she hunched further into her sweatshirt. At the rate she was going, she'd soon be inside the hood without doing anything to raise it. I got the impression she wanted to hear everything without being seen or recognized.

Wait a second; now I thought I knew who she was. Take off the glasses, take her hair down, put on a full makeup job, and dress her in professional clothes, and I was pretty sure she was a local television reporter—the one who'd interviewed Abigail Williams. She might also have been the one in the park, now that I thought about it. My stomach clenched. If a reporter was looking into this, we were in big trouble.

"I'm sure you have something you could contribute," Lara said, drawing my attention back to her. She attempted another smile, but the corners of her lips didn't go much higher than before. "So, are you getting married? Or were you there with a friend who was shopping for a dress?"

Again, I wasn't sure I wanted to tell the truth, but I didn't want to get caught lying. "Yeah, I'm getting married," I said. "That's probably why I didn't see too much. I was so focused on finding a dress that they probably could have blown up the building around me without me noticing."

"Well, now that you're aware of the magic around us, I'm sure you'll be seeing much more. Or have you seen other things?"

"I don't know," I said with a casual shrug. "I'm not originally from New York, so the whole city seems kind of strange and magical to me, you know?" I let my drawl deepen. "I see all kinds of crazy things, but I figure it's just New York. No one else around me seems to see them. I guess I'm still just a hick."

“Maybe you’re seeing more than you realize. Keep your eyes open, and be sure to file reports,” she said, not even trying to smile anymore, before turning away. While we’d been talking, the reporter had edged around us and slunk out the door, avoiding conversation with anyone. Had she come to this meeting because of a story she was working on, or had it been for personal reasons? If she was here on a story, she hadn’t made any effort to get names or contact info, but she could have merely been doing background research.

Now with two goals in mind, getting someone to contact the potentially immune homeless guys and finding out what the reporter’s deal was, I hurried out of the meeting room before anyone else could waylay me for conversation. Trish didn’t protest our rapid departure. “Well, wasn’t she just a perky ray of sunshine,” she muttered as we climbed the steps to the exit.

“Who?” I asked, my thoughts still on the reporter.

“Who else? Miss Dress-for-Success you were just talking to.”

“Yeah, there was something odd about her.”

“Who else did you think I meant?”

We reached the exit, and I found myself breathing a little more freely once we were out on the sidewalk. “Did you notice that woman who came in late and sat on our row? Did you recognize her?”

“I didn’t pay her much attention, though she did seem to be trying to go incognito. Why? Should I know her? Was she some actress?”

“If I’m not mistaken, she’s the reporter who covered the bridal brawl, the one who interviewed Abigail Williams when she talked about magic.”

“Oh. So I guess she didn’t write that woman off as a total nutjob.”

“Or she’s doing an exposé on nutjobs like that.”

“Well, if that’s what she wanted, she got plenty of material in that meeting. There was something odd about that whole situation, and ‘odd’ is putting it mildly. Though it sounds like those homeless guys must be immune. Poor guys, they probably think they’re imagining things.”

“Which reminds me,” I said, getting out my phone and calling Sam. “I don’t know which of your guys is staking this place out,” I said into the phone, “but there were a couple of men who I’d guess are homeless at this meeting, and one of them said he saw gargoyles and fairies while his friend nodded. You might want to check them out as immunes. Learning that they’re right about magic might help them, and they might make good assets for us. They haven’t come outside yet.”

“What? We said we weren’t going to have anyone there, just in case of immunes.”

“Sam, really?” I didn’t believe for a minute he’d let me go

unguarded. He was just being careful about hiding.

He gave a soft sigh. "I'll keep an eye out."

That taken care of, I put away my phone and said to Trish, "Reporter aside, that meeting wasn't quite what I was expecting."

"You too? If I didn't know better, I'd say it was all a setup to make these magic watchers look like idiots."

"I was thinking the same thing, even considering setting up an event like that if we have to do something to shut all this down. I'm pretty sure it's not the same group as the woman I met at the bridal sale."

"So there really are multiple factions out there?"

"There are multiple blogs, so I guess so. But it seems like they all cross-pollinate. They report on the same events, but sometimes I think they're just reporting what they saw on one of the other blogs."

"Then maybe it's not so big a threat. It'll all blow over soon enough."

"Let's hope so." But I didn't feel entirely confident about that. These people didn't seem the type to back down.

"And what about the reporter? She may be the real danger."

"Well, unless she had a hidden camera on her, a TV reporter doesn't have much if she doesn't get footage, so I doubt she was reporting on the meeting." I hoped she hadn't been secretly recording the meeting. I didn't want to end up on TV speaking up about having seen magic. "And either she dragged herself out of her sickbed to attend the meeting or she was trying to avoid being recognized."

"So maybe she's researching a story. Or maybe she got curious after covering that story. Or, who knows, maybe she just happens to be into this sort of thing. She might also go on ghost tours and expeditions to hunt Bigfoot."

"Let's hope so. Because if a reporter starts taking this at all seriously, we're in real trouble."

"Or, if this meeting is the kind of thing she sees when she starts investigating, it entirely blows all their credibility, and this magic-watching movement will fizzle out."

"You're so optimistic."

"Just call me Pollyanna."

"I hope you're right." But my experience was that things tended to get worse rather than miraculously getting better on their own.

I was running late for work the next morning, and even though I doubted Sam was a stickler for punctuality, especially since I'd been on an assignment the night before, I still hated to be late. I suppose I'd never gotten over my ex-boss Mimi, who acted like I'd personally brought on Armageddon if I was two minutes late getting to my desk.

I heard the roar and whoosh of a departing train as I rounded the

corner to head down the stairs to my platform. Just my luck, I'd barely missed a train, so I'd have to wait for the next one. Since there was no point in running, I continued down the stairs to the platform at a more reasonable pace.

When I was about halfway down the final flight of stairs, I heard a strange screeching sound and had to groan. If there was a mechanical problem somewhere on the line, there would be no hope of getting to work on time. Wouldn't you know, this had to happen on the rare morning I wasn't commuting with Owen, who could generally resolve problems like this with a subtle wave of his hand.

But when I reached the platform, I was surprised to see the train that had just left moving backwards up the track, back to the platform. Judging by the number of other people running down the stairs and toward the train, I wasn't the only one who'd noticed. Either something ahead was so badly broken that they'd had to back a train up, or someone was doing some serious public magic.

The train doors opened as though this was an ordinary stop. Nobody left the train, and there was no announcement telling people that this line had been closed and that all passengers must exit. It looked like we really had been given a second chance at a train. The commuters who couldn't believe their stroke of luck surged forward to board. While I was grateful for the do-over that might get me to work on time, I also wanted to see who'd done the spell that had brought the train back, so I scanned the platform.

There was a man who'd been ahead of me when I arrived, reaching the platform just as the train pulled out, but he hadn't even tried to catch it, which was at least moderately suspicious, given the train's abrupt return. When he headed to the train, I ran toward him, jumping into the same car. You'd think it would be hard to lose someone in a subway car, but the car had already been rush-hour full. Then there were all the people who'd boarded after the backup. He wore a suit and carried a backpack, so he blended in easily with the crowd heading downtown. I hadn't seen enough of him to distinguish him other than by his clothes. Almost any man on the train could have been the one I'd followed. Not that I was certain he was a suspect. His lack of urgency might have been because he knew he could recall the train, but he might just not have been in a hurry to get to work.

At any rate, I had enough to worry about trying to stay on my feet when I could barely reach a pole to hold on to. The train seemed to be making up for the lost time from backing up by going faster. I wasn't sure if that was the engineer's doing or the wizard's. I couldn't help but wonder how the MTA would spin this incident. Was it the sort of thing people would think was magic, or would most people assume it was a train malfunction?

Although I was alarmed by the event, it did help me get to work on time. Once I'd checked my e-mail and filed a formal report of the incident, I headed to Trish's office. "You're never going to believe what happened on my way to work this morning," I said from her doorway.

"All traffic came to a sudden and complete stop, against the light in the middle of the block, leaving an open path for you and the people around you to walk across? It was like Moses parting the Red Sea, only it was a sea of taxis and delivery vans."

"Really?"

"You work here, and that surprises you?"

"I'm not surprised that something like that might happen. I'm just

a little surprised that it happened around you on the same morning when a subway train left the platform, then suddenly stopped and backed up so the people who'd just missed it had a chance to catch it."

"I guess it's Be Kind to Commuters Day in the magical world."

"How often do you see that sort of thing happening?" I asked.

"To be honest, never. Even when the cops try to stop traffic, they don't get that kind of perfect compliance."

"I've seen Owen summon a train, but it's pretty subtle. Nothing so dramatic as backing up. And now there are two incidents on the same morning?"

"The morning after both of us attended a meeting about spotting magical incidents. Interesting. Is that how they're getting pictures of magical stuff, figuring out the people who are looking for magic and making sure that magical things happen in front of them?"

"Maybe. Or it could have nothing to do with the meeting. We need to see how widespread this is or if it's just us."

I went back to my office and contacted Rod to get him to send a company-wide memo asking for reports of nonveiled magic-related incidents anyone might have seen that morning. While I waited for those results, I checked the magic-watching blogs. You'd think something like that would have lit them up, but the only report I saw of the subway incident, on the Abigail Williams blog, was so detailed and extensive that it couldn't possibly have been written that morning. It didn't read at all like what someone who'd seen something truly odd would have rushed to the office and written. It contained details I hadn't noticed—and that I'm pretty sure hadn't actually happened in that way—and was surprisingly free of typos. I'm a good typist, and I'm not sure I could have dashed off something that long in the time since I got to the office without it being riddled with errors.

Whoever wrote that post had known what would happen and had prepared a report ahead of time, so it had the things that must have been planned right, but missed some of the details of the way it had actually happened. That proved to me that magical people were involved somewhere in all of this. It wasn't just about people who noticed weird things and wanted to be validated. The question was, how were the magical people involved? Were they using the magic watchers, or were they in cahoots?

I had lunch with Owen in his office and told him about the meeting the night before. He was as worried as I'd felt about the reporter's presence. "If she's working on a story, we may have to intervene," he said. "I know you have qualms about that, but we can't let her publicly expose magic to a broad audience. We'll have to discredit her or otherwise do something to ruin the story."

"Yeah, I know," I said, trying to swallow a lump in my throat. "I

had the same thought. But maybe she's just interested personally. She definitely wasn't there in the role of famous television personality. She didn't want to be recognized."

"Have you had Sam get someone to keep an eye on her?"

"I'm a little worried about that. What if she's an immune who's seen things and is trying to make sense of it all? If that's the case, the last thing we need is a gargoyle following her."

"Yikes! Good point."

"And then there was this morning's commute. You didn't notice anything odd, did you?"

"I saw Rod's memo. What was that about?"

I described what Trish and I had seen. "We're trying to find out if these things were happening all over town, or if they're just targeting people who were at the meeting," I added.

"I didn't see anything, but that doesn't mean much. I'm not sure what I'd notice. Backing up a train is kind of crazy, though. I hope he was also using a spell to slow the next train on the tracks. They aren't that far apart, and throwing off the timing like that could have caused problems. At the very least, there would have been slowdowns all the way up the line. I may sometimes move trains slightly faster toward an empty platform. I'd never back one up."

"That's because you aren't a selfish sociopath."

"I had a great deal of training in magical ethics. That's why we worry about rogue wizards who don't grow up through our system and aren't steeped in the kind of training most of us get. Look at what happened with your brother."

The magical genes ran amok in my family, with both wizards and magical immunes, and because we live in a very nonmagical part of the world, none of us had realized what we were until we were older. My middle brother had figured out he could do magic and had used it to go on a minor crime spree. If someone from a good family who'd been taught right and wrong did that, I could only imagine what someone with a shadier morality might do with magic. Making sure he caught a subway train would only be the tip of the iceberg.

"While that is scary on a big-picture level," I said after nibbling at my sandwich, "what if these events were staged for the benefit of Trish and me and the other people at that meeting? They could have used the meeting to identify people who are looking for magic, and then made sure they saw magic. That means I'm being followed, so I may be known, or I could be tied to this company, or to you."

"Are you sure you're not just letting your last assignment get to you? Having the magical mafia watch your every move has to have had an effect on you."

"I can have been turned a little paranoid by that assignment and

still be followed now.”

“If they did follow you, maybe they only wanted to make sure you saw that one demonstration. They might not follow you everywhere.”

“If you’re figuring out where to stage magical events for someone’s benefit, you’ll probably figure out where they work. They had to have known at least something about my commute to know where to stage that train thing, since it happened before I was at the platform.”

“And you said the report had to have been pre-written. Did it contain the location?”

“Yeah.”

“And did you give them enough information for them to have identified you and figured out where you live and work?”

“No, I just gave my first name.”

“Then unless they were already watching you before you attended the meeting, it wasn’t staged for your benefit.”

I hadn’t thought about it that way, and I instantly felt a lot better. “Maybe you’re right and I’m still being paranoid after that last assignment,” I said, reaching across his desk and swiping one of his potato chips. “I’m just worried about all this. If magic gets exposed, then I might have to get a normal job.”

“If everyone knows about magic, you’ll probably be in even more demand than ever. Think about it—it won’t just be magical people needing immunes to help them make sure everything’s on the level. Everyone else will want things validated, too.”

“Well, then, why am I trying to stop all this?” I said with a grin. But even if I’d come out ahead, I worried about what would happen to Owen and people like him. That was why I wanted to put a stop to this.

When I got back to my office, Rod had already sent a list of reports in response to his memo, and it looked like Owen was right. There were too many incidents for me to have been specifically targeted, but not enough for it to look like a coordinated operation to shower the city with visible magic. Sam also reported that the gargoyles who’d been watching the homeless guys to evaluate them for magical immunity hadn’t seen any open magical incidents around them, so not everyone at the meeting was being targeted. That made me feel a little better.

I looked up the website for the station where I thought that reporter worked and scrolled through their staff list until I saw a photo that looked familiar. There she was—scrub off the on-camera makeup, pull the bouncy shoulder-length hair back into a ponytail, add a pair of glasses, and bury her in a huge sweatshirt, and that was the woman from the meeting. Her name was Carmen Hernandez, and she was a general-assignment reporter who’d joined the station a few

months earlier. It didn't look like she did a lot of muckraking exposés, but I supposed there was always the chance she was looking for the scoop of the century to help make her career.

I just wished I knew what her aim was. Was she following up on that interview, or did she have some other interest in looking into magic? Either way, it could mean trouble for us. If she was investigating, as careless—or as deliberate—as the magical people were being, she could blow the whole thing wide open and change magical society for good. If she was immune to magic and curious about what she was seeing, a reporter we couldn't hide magic from could be a problem.

I presented my findings to Sam in the security department conference room. I figured this wasn't a conversation to have in the open by the awning. "I could put one of our more discreet operatives on the reporter," he said. "A human wizard can change appearance magically and be a less obvious tail, but if she's magically immune it wouldn't be quite as shocking as a gargoyle."

"That could work," I said. "But be careful. We don't want to do anything that will give her anything resembling proof."

"Hey, we've kept the secret this long. I think we can manage it awhile longer."

"You didn't have the Internet and cell phone cameras before," I pointed out. "This is a different world. I don't know, does magic even belong in a technological age?"

"Hey, now, don't go gettin' all existential on me, doll," he said, patting my shoulder. "And don't you have a wedding to be planning?"

I did, and that was difficult to do when I was afraid of being seen in public with Owen—or him being seen in public with me. Even though it didn't seem as though the magic watchers were really watching me, I worried about hanging around with a wizard when I might be under surveillance. If another big magical incident happened around me and Owen was there, it wouldn't look good for him with the magical authorities.

Fortunately, the way he worked, I didn't have to try too hard to avoid seeing him in public. We had lunch together at the office most days, and that allowed us to see each other. Otherwise, I could head home at five while he was still busy in his lab, and he didn't seem to notice a thing.

Or so I thought, until a few days later when I was changing into my commuting shoes at my desk and looked up to see him standing in my office doorway. I paused to contemplate the sight. I'd grown accustomed to him by now, but every so often it struck me just how gorgeous he was. Like now. His dark suit and white shirt were perfect for his striking coloring, with dark hair, fair skin, and dark blue eyes.

He was like a male version of Snow White, and any magic mirror would have to declare him the fairest of them all.

I must have stared at him longer than I realized because he started blushing, a wash of pink rising from his collar to his hairline. That made him even cuter. If he'd had an ego, he might have been a bit too much, but his bashfulness brought him back to the realm of mere mortals. "I, um, wanted to see if you wanted to try tasting some possible dinners tonight," he said. He raised an eyebrow. "Or have you been avoiding me?"

I winced. "Am I that obvious? It's not because I don't want to be with you."

"You're protecting me."

It was rather sweet that the conclusion he'd jumped to was the positive one. "Yes, because we know the powers that be are already after you, and I'm still not sure if I'm being watched by these anti-magic people."

"But didn't we decide that you were being paranoid, that you weren't being followed and watched?"

"We discussed it," I hedged.

"How many magical incidents have happened around you in the last couple of days?"

"None," I admitted.

"So I don't think you have to worry about me getting blamed for something that happens because they're staging magical incidents in front of you."

"Well, when you put it that way . . . Where did you want to go to try meals?"

"There's that Italian place we like in the Village. I thought we could start there, and if we find something we like, I can come up with a spell to duplicate it, in whatever form we want."

"For food, wouldn't it be safer to do it the normal way?"

"Don't tell me you're buying into this anti-magic stuff." His tone was light and teasing, but I could see the concern in his eyes. "Has magical food ever gone wrong for you? I conjure lunch for us every day. Or are you rethinking a magical wedding altogether?"

"Whoa, hey, I never said that." I sighed. "I guess maybe I am getting a bit paranoid. I spend way too much of my day scouring the Internet for reports of magic. That's probably got me overestimating the impact of these groups. And I suspect I'd just have to look at the cost of a real wedding caterer to be totally okay with a magical one. Not to mention, we wouldn't stand a chance of booking a caterer so late, especially not one we could let in this building."

Even though I'd reassured him, I couldn't help but be on high alert as we left the building. I wore the necklace that amplified the

sensation of magic around me so I'd know exactly what was going on, and I kept my eyes peeled for signs of anything unusual. Nobody levitated a bus or reversed a subway train, and there were no strange riots on the subway, or any other weirdness that I'd experienced. Come to think of it, it was so normal as to be odd, probably because most magical people were lying low right now. Aside from those who seemed to be trying to get attention, no one was using magic in public.

Which meant we had an uneventful dinner, during which we discussed what I knew of my mother's plans for the reception back home. I felt a slight hint of magic as he evaluated the lasagna, like he was trying to figure out how to create it magically. When my necklace tingled, I went on alert, making sure no one noticed him using magic, but he wasn't actually doing anything for anyone to notice, unless they'd learned to recognize what magic felt like. Most people dismissed the sensation as a shiver up their spine or goosebumps.

"You can relax now," he said dryly as he looked across the table at me. "I'm done, and no one would notice anything unless they saw you jumping out of your skin."

"Sorry," I said with a wince. "I guess I'm on edge."

"Maybe Sam should rotate who's on the assignment. Being on high alert for so long can't be good for you. You need a break. And don't tell me you're the only one who can do it."

I was about to respond, but I looked up at the television on the wall and saw Carmen Hernandez reporting. "That's the reporter," I whispered to Owen, who turned to look. The sound was down, but the closed captioning was on, and after I read a few lines, I let myself relax. She was reporting on a school bus accident—a nice, normal event that didn't have the slightest whiff of magic about it. And if she was busy on that assignment, that meant she wasn't digging into magic today.

Feeling much better, I reached across the table with my fork to taste Owen's lasagna. "Mmm, you know, I like the chicken parmesan, but this has something to be said for it," I said.

"We can have more than one entree," he said with an indulgent smile. "And this wedding won't be the only time you can ever have Italian food. I will feed you Italian food every night for the rest of our lives, if you like."

"Aww, that's so sweet. Is that part of your wedding vows?"

"If you want me to put it in, I will."

"Well, every night might be excessive. It wouldn't be special anymore. And I'd have to start seriously exercising."

We were still discussing the optimum frequency of lasagna consumption as we left the restaurant, his arm around me. I'd almost

entirely forgotten my worry about magic exposure, but before we reached the end of the block, I heard a voice call out, "Hey, Kathleen!"

I almost didn't respond because no one called me by that name, other than sometimes my mother when she was really angry, but then I remembered that this was the name I'd given at the meeting. I turned to see a man leaning against the wall. It was one of the homeless guys from the meeting, the one who'd talked about seeing gargoyles. I hadn't introduced myself to him, but he must have overheard me talking to the meeting organizer.

"Hi," I said, somewhat warily.

He beckoned me closer, and after a glance at Owen, I moved over to him. "Your gargoyle friends talked to us, like you said," he whispered. "So it's really real?"

"Yes, it is," I assured him. "Seeing things like that means you're special, not crazy."

"They offered my friend and me a job. Should we take it?"

"Did they tell you what kind of job?" I'd had a lousy time in the verification department where most magical immunes started at the company, but most of that had been because of a terrible boss. He'd been exposed as an agent of the magical mafia, so things were bound to be better there now. Still, I wasn't sure it was the best place for a guy who'd been living on the streets because he thought he was hallucinating.

"They want us to keep an eye on things. We'll have a place to live, but we can stay out here as much as we want. We're not big on the indoors and offices, and stuff," he said.

It sounded like MSI Security, so I smiled and said, "You should definitely take it. That's my department, though I mostly work in an office. Welcome to the team."

"I see you've also joined the recruitment group," Owen teased as we continued heading toward home.

"Well, immunes are rare, and I figured that knowing the truth might change that guy's life, and his friend's. Sam's good to find a way to work with them that doesn't scare them away. I can imagine it would be tough for them to adjust to an office job. I doubt all their problems will be solved overnight."

"And having undercover agents on the streets, people no one will notice, could be a real asset to us," Owen said, nodding. "Good thinking."

"At least something good will have come of all this."

We passed a corner store, and I said, "Mind if we pop in here for a second? I need to stock up on my weekly tabloids."

"I don't think we have much to worry about if a story comes out

there,” he said. “And you already know that the most accurate stories probably come from our people.”

“Yeah, but I consider it the canary in the coal mine. If they start reporting it, it might eventually make its way into something people will actually believe. Besides, I want to know where Elvis has been lately.”

I loaded up on newspapers and hoped I didn’t run into anyone I knew the rest of the way home. I’d hate for anyone to think I actually read these things. Then again, almost everyone I knew would know why I was reading them. My mother must have been rubbing off on me, making me worry far too much about what people thought about me.

We passed through Union Square as we headed toward my apartment. There was a decent-sized crowd there, more than I would have expected on a weeknight. “I wonder what’s going on,” I said. “It doesn’t look like a concert or festival.”

“It looks like someone is speaking. Probably something political.” He kept walking, but I tugged on his arm.

“Maybe we should see what it is. I have a feeling.”

“I thought I was the one with a mild case of precognition.”

“Humor me.”

We paused at the rear of the crowd, and I barely stifled a low moan. The man who’d spoken at the magic watching meeting stood on a soapbox, shouting through a megaphone. “You can’t deny the evidence,” he was saying. “We’ve recorded too many incidents. Magic is real!”

A number of people in the crowd chuckled. This being New York, I suspected a lot of them thought this was some kind of performance art piece.

“Yes, magic is real, and it must be stopped!” the man shouted. “Magic is evil. Power corrupts, and there is no way anyone with that kind of power can remain uncorrupted. What are they doing while they keep the secret? Are they using their power to run the world? How high does this go in the government? We deserve answers!”

I watched the crowd, trying to gauge the reaction. It didn’t seem like anyone took him seriously. At least, no one shouted in agreement. When he started a “Stop magic now!” chant, no one joined in.

But then a pair of men dressed all in black stepped up, snatched his megaphone, grabbed his arms, pulled him off the soapbox, and hauled him away. He shouted, “You see what they’re doing! They’re trying to keep me silent! Don’t let them!” Without the megaphone, his voice was barely audible, and it faded as they dragged him off. I couldn’t see where they took him from where I stood. The crowd was in the way, and I wasn’t tall enough to see over all those heads.

“Do you see where they took him?” I asked Owen, though he wasn’t that much taller than I was.

He stood on tiptoes and craned his neck, then shook his head. “Sorry, no.”

It still seemed like the crowd was assuming it was a performance art piece. No one had rushed to the man’s rescue, so they must have thought the men were part of the act. And there was a distinct possibility that they were. It could all have been staged to make his message seem more credible.

I was about to turn and head for home when I noticed bright lights across the crowd. It looked like there was a television camera set up over there. They’d been filming the whole thing.

"We've got to get you away from here," I said, already steering Owen down the sidewalk.

"What? Why?" he asked, but he didn't resist.

"That reporter from the meeting is here with a camera crew."

"But I thought she was covering a school bus crash."

"That must not have been a live report. She can do more than one story a day."

"You've got to wonder how she knew to be here. What did they do, put out a press release?"

"Maybe. I'll look into it. I would tell you to make yourself invisible, but that won't work if she's immune, and it might just draw attention to you if you suddenly disappear."

I wished I knew what Carmen was doing, but to find out, I'd have to look directly at her, and that would increase the risk of her seeing and recognizing me. Instead, I kept my head turned so she would be less likely to see my face. It was fairly dark, so she probably couldn't see past the range of the TV lights, and the odds were slim that she'd think to look for people she recognized in the crowd.

"Did you know those guys in black?" I asked Owen. "They looked like Council enforcers."

"I've never seen them before, and that's not the way the Council operates. Black is the universal color for covert-type operations, cat burglars, ninjas, and other people who don't want to be seen or identified. My bet is that it was a stunt to make it look like his message is being suppressed."

"Do you think they know about the enforcers and what they look like?"

"If you want to look like a dangerous secret organization, you're probably not going to wear pastels, so I don't think the black attire means anything."

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" a voice shouted. My instinct was to turn around, but I reminded myself that there were a lot of people here. The woman could have been shouting at anyone. "Kathleen!"

"Uh oh," I muttered.

"Are you suddenly trying not to be Katie?" Owen asked.

"I did try that when I first moved to New York, but it didn't stick. However, that was the name I gave at the meeting so it wouldn't necessarily instantly track back to me, but it also wouldn't be a lie. Now, go. Head home or to my place, just get away from here." I released his arm and quickly turned away from him, heading toward

the shouting voice and hoping the crowd filled in behind me to hide Owen.

Carmen left her cameraman behind to approach me, but I didn't let my guard down. For all I knew, they had a night vision lens and long-range microphone. "Did you know about this?" she asked.

"No," I said, trying to sound casual, like this was no big deal to me. "I was just on my way home from dinner and passed by." Although that was the absolute truth, I was afraid it sounded shady. Then I realized I was still holding the stack of tabloids and tucked them under my arm, hoping the headlines didn't show. I doubted a real journalist would be impressed by someone who read that stuff, and I couldn't tell her why I was reading it. "I showed up toward the end, so I'm not even sure what was happening."

"So they didn't send out info to everyone in the group?"

"I don't know that there really is a 'group.' I know I didn't sign up for any mailing list. They wouldn't have had a way to send me any information."

I thought she relaxed a little. "You're right. I didn't sign up for anything. So maybe it was just a news release."

"About what?"

"Something about a demonstration that would prove the existence of magic and that there was a conspiracy to cover it up."

"Did it?"

"Prove magic? Not that I could tell. That guy just shouted a lot, and then some people came and hauled him away. Maybe that was supposed to be the proof of the conspiracy to cover it up, that they didn't want him talking about it."

"If it was magic people trying to silence him, wouldn't they have just made him disappear or turned him into a frog, or something like that?" I suggested, scrambling for an excuse.

"But that would prove that magic's real, defeating the point of the conspiracy to keep it hidden."

"Oh, yeah. Well, they could have made him lose his voice, made his megaphone quit working, called up a storm that would have dispersed the crowd, or maybe even made all of us forget what we saw. Dragging him away seems like a pretty mundane and ineffective way to silence his message."

"Good point," she said, nodding. "So maybe he's just a crackpot conspiracy theorist pulling a publicity stunt." She glanced around, moved closer to me, and dropped her voice. "But if you were at that bridal sale where those things happened, you know it's not all hype. There's something going on, and that's not the first time I've seen strange things."

"I don't really know what I saw at that bridal sale. I didn't even

think much of it until I saw your story on the news.”

“So you did recognize me. I had a feeling at that meeting.”

“It took me awhile since you looked so different than you do on TV, but yeah. That story made me curious, and when I saw the flier, I thought I’d at least check things out.” All of those statements were true, though there were a lot of missing parts.

“Have you seen other weird stuff?”

That was a lot harder to answer without lying or without letting on more than I wanted to share. I laughed and shrugged. “It’s New York, of course I’ve seen weird stuff. Whether it’s magic or not, well . . .”

“The jury’s still out,” she concluded.

“What kind of stuff have you seen?” I asked, trying not to sound like I was probing or interrogating. I hoped I came across like I was mildly curious.

“I don’t know. There are things that disappear or reappear. Like, there’s a church that only sometimes has gargoyles on it, which isn’t supposed to be the way that works. Or maybe I only notice them sometimes.”

It took all my self-control to keep a mildly interested smile on my face while my stomach went into freefall. A magically immune reporter was a worst-case scenario. The only saving grace was that she wouldn’t be able to get proof of most of the things she saw. Magical veils work even in photographs and film, so photos of veiled magic wouldn’t work as evidence to convince a non-immune. But with people using magic openly, possibly for the purpose of exposing it, we had a real problem on our hands.

“That is weird,” I said, nodding. “But is it magic? If you had magic powers, surely you’d do more with it than make gargoyles appear and disappear. It just seems like magic would be so big it would be impossible to hide.”

“Unless they’re using magic to hide the magic.”

I forced myself not to react as violently as I wanted to. It was a little alarming that she’d figured that much out without knowing anything. “But why? Wouldn’t they be better off using it? Or do you think they’re secretly ruling the world?”

She gave a huge sigh. “I don’t know. But I don’t think there’s much of a story here. Maybe there’s something to a Union Square speaker getting hauled away by mysterious men in black, but I’d need a lot more proof of magic to be able to do a story about that without getting laughed out of town.” She handed me a business card. “If you do see something that I could document, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Sure,” I said. The operative words there were “that I could document,” and there was nothing she could document, as far as I was

concerned. "But I really doubt there's anything to all this."

My cell phone rang, and I fished it out of my purse, looked at the display, and said, "I really have to take this." She waved a farewell, and I walked a few steps away before I accepted the call.

"Where are you?" Owen said.

"Still in the park, but I'm leaving now."

"Are you okay?"

"That reporter recognized me from the meeting and wanted to talk. There wasn't anything conclusive. Where are you?"

"I went home."

"Okay, I'll head over there because we need to talk."

His house was a few blocks away. I had a key, so I let myself into the stairwell and ran up to his front door. He opened the door as I neared it. As soon as I'd entered and he'd shut the door behind me, I blurted, "She's immune to magic. The reporter. At least, it sounds like it. She sees the gargoyles. It sounded a lot like what I saw before I learned what was going on."

"Whoa, slow down," he said, taking the stack of tabloids from under my arm and guiding me into the living room. His cat darted out from under the sofa as I sank onto it. He put the papers on the coffee table and sat beside me, holding both my hands. His touch made me feel a lot steadier. "So, you're saying you think the reporter who covered the magical brawl at the bridal sale and went to that anti-magic meeting is immune to magic?"

"It sounds like it, from the way she described things. Oh, and I think she was also the one in the park when the bicycles attacked. I tried to dismiss what she thinks she saw, and I feel awful about doing that. I know what it was like, seeing things and not knowing what was going on."

"And she's investigating claims of magic to try to make sense of what she's seen?"

"That seems to be the case."

"Do you think she's involved in any of these groups?"

I shrugged. "Hard to say. I don't know if she knows about the websites, if she's tracking down these reports. But she did get a news release from that group. She wasn't sure if they recognized her at the meeting and targeted her for that, or if they saw her story on the bridal event. She's still kind of skeptical, which is good, but I don't know how long it will last."

"But you managed to calm her down?"

"I don't know." It came out as a moan. "I didn't lie to her, but I didn't confirm her suspicions. Maybe we should tell her the truth."

"We should wait and see the kind of person she is."

"Sam's having her watched by non-gargoyles. I'll have to warn him

that she's probably immune. We were acting as though she is, to be on the safe side. She wants me to keep in touch, but I'd have to think of an excuse, something magic-related that's not confirming magic."

He patted me on the shoulder, then put his arm around me and pulled me close. I let myself melt against him, taking comfort in him. "See, we have a plan," he said softly, murmuring into my ear. "It'll be okay."

When I got home a little later, Nita was sitting at the kitchen table, wearing her pajamas and eating cereal. "Overnight shift tonight?" I asked, setting the papers down on the table so I could take off my jacket.

She nodded. "The worst. It's either insanely boring or ridiculously stressful. Just about anything that happens overnight is bad, and most people checking in or out during those hours are really grumpy. Mostly, it's long hours of hanging out around the desk. Oooh, you brought me reading material." She grabbed the top paper from the stack. "Hey, look at this—the Illuminati were apparently responsible for that car that floated out of a dealership window a while ago. It was mind control and telekinesis, and the CIA is experimenting on teaching people to do that. I wonder if they're taking applications."

While Nita finished her breakfast/dinner, we read headlines to each other, laughing at how outlandish they were. None of the stories, other than the one about the car, matched any magical events I was aware of. If even the tabloid reporters weren't taking it seriously, and if they felt the need to embellish the one truly magical event to make it more interesting, then it seemed unlikely that a legitimate reporter from a real news organization would be able to develop a story.

When it was time for the late news, I turned on the television, telling Nita I wanted to check the weather forecast. How would Carmen cover the event at Union Square, or would she? An apparent kidnapping in public was pretty shocking, but there was also the chance that it had been a publicity stunt.

It wasn't the lead story. There was a lot of other stuff going on in the city, and the late news also recapped national and international headlines. The "kidnapping" didn't come up before the first commercial break. When it hadn't been mentioned before the weather report, I suspected it wouldn't make the news tonight.

"Ugh, I'd better bring a jacket," Nita said, just as my finger was about to twitch on the remote, and then I remembered that I'd supposedly turned on the news to see the weather forecast. "That's one thing I miss about Texas: not having to wear a coat in April. Shouldn't it be getting warmer?"

"It depends," I said. "It goes back and forth at this time of year. But the same thing happens back home. I remember having snow

flurries on Easter a few times. And here we can generally go outdoors in August without bursting into flames.”

“True.” She yawned and stretched. “Well, time to go get ready for a good night’s work. Catch you later.”

As I turned off the TV, I felt a lot better about the situation, but I couldn’t escape the nagging sense that disaster was looming.

When I got to work the next morning, I checked for signs of the “kidnapping” story, both in the legitimate media and in the various magic-watching blogs. The Abigail Williams blog didn’t have a mention of it, but one of the more virulent anti-magic sites had a huge report about one of their spokespeople being silenced. If I got nothing else out of this event, now at least I knew which site had sponsored that meeting at the church. I figured that the correlation of their spokesperson and the coverage of the event was a pretty good sign. I felt like I should put up one of those conspiracy boards, like on TV, with colored string to tie people and groups together as I found patterns.

“Okay, so what’s the deal with men in black kidnapping a guy?” I looked up to see Trish entering my office.

“Exactly what they said, assuming you read the same thing I just read. I happened to be there. My guess is it was a publicity stunt to make it look like he was being silenced, because the magic police don’t work like that, and they sent a news release to that reporter who was at the meeting. Supposedly, he was going to reveal everything about magic.”

“And it’s so very convenient that he got dragged away by men in black before he could do so, huh? Makes you wonder how much proof these people really have, if they have to resort to stunts like that.”

“Carmen—the reporter—seems to have landed on the side of skepticism this time, and she didn’t do a story last night. If this was supposed to be their big, attention-grabbing event, it backfired.”

She sank onto the chair beside my desk and stretched out her legs in front of her. “That one site that reported this stunt is a real piece of work. It looks like the people who burn Harry Potter books because they think they teach kids to do magic and worship Satan have started taking it all too seriously and are looking for magic in the real world.”

“Well, there is magic in the real world, though I can’t tell that it has much to do with Satan,” I said. “That’s what makes this all so tricky. If they were just wrong, we could laugh at them. But there is magic. And there are some evil people using magic. You’re not going to get anywhere using the spells in children’s books, even if you have power, so that part is silly. But they’re not entirely wrong.”

“On the other hand, they could cause serious trouble with the parts they’re right about. What are our next steps?”

“I guess just keep an eye on it. I think I talked Carmen down from being worried about that kidnapping. I stopped just short of gaslighting, her, though. I didn’t tell her anything that wasn’t true, but I also didn’t validate what she might have seen. Fortunately, there wasn’t any magic involved with this. I don’t know what I’ll do if there ever actually is magic happening in front of her.”

“Maybe you’d better start thinking about that,” she said sternly. “At the rate things are going, it’s likely to happen, and you should be prepared. You need to know where you’re going to draw the line. What are you willing to do to keep the secret, and is there something you won’t do? If you figure that out ahead of time, you won’t have to make the decision in the heat of the moment.”

“Planning for it just means that it won’t go the way I planned,” I said with a weary sigh.

“I don’t think the exact event will make much difference on those big questions. There may be some room for improvisation, but you need to know if you’re willing to outright lie.”

“It would help if I could just tell her the truth. We recruit immunes all the time. Why not this one?”

“I’m not the one to ask about that. Maybe you’d better take that up with the boss.”

I knew what everyone above me, as well as Owen, was likely to say about that. They were really careful about how they broke the news to potential immunes. First, there was a lot of testing to guarantee the immune status. Then they figured out the person’s situation—did they need a new job, were they already thinking that there was something going on, were they likely to spill the beans to others? A television reporter would probably be considered too risky. There wasn’t any job at MSI that was likely to fit her skill set or be of interest to her, unless she just wanted to be around magic. Her job was spilling the beans, and if she had any proof at all, this would be a story that could make her career. It all came down to the kind of person she was and whether she’d be willing or able to see the potential risks of that story getting out. We didn’t know enough about her to know where she might stand.

The little bio on the station’s website didn’t tell me much, other than where she went to school and where she’d worked before. She was relatively new to this station from a smaller city, and she seemed young to have made it to the New York market. That meant she was both really good and really ambitious. The ambition was a possible cause for concern.

On the other hand, if she wanted to be taken seriously in her field, she’d have to have absolute proof of magic, something normal people could see that they were sure wasn’t special effects. An ambitious

person with no ethics might be willing to fudge a few details to get a hot story on something serious like politics or business, but someone who wanted to be known as a top reporter would have to be extremely careful about claiming to have proof of magic. As she'd said, she'd be laughed out of town—and probably the business—if there was the slightest doubt.

Of course, deciding that she was super ambitious was a big call to make from reading between the lines of a website bio. I did a search on her and came up with a few articles. She'd spoken at some school career days, and it looked like one of them was her alma mater, an inner-city high school where she'd encouraged the kids to work hard to achieve their dreams, no matter what the odds looked like. She did a fair amount of community outreach through the station. I thought that was a positive sign that she was trying to be a good role model, but it still didn't tell me whether she'd be willing to sit on news of the existence of magic.

On the other hand, she'd shown persistence in overcoming the odds against her, which told me she wouldn't stop digging until she got an answer. Wouldn't it be better to give her an answer and be able to frame it properly before she found it for herself?

Before I went through official channels, I decided to talk to Owen. I waited until that evening, when we were at his place, having dinner. That made it feel less official, more like idle chat about work than me actually running an idea by him. "I've been looking into that reporter," I said.

"The one who's been covering those magical events?"

"Yeah, the one who may be immune. I'm worried that she's going to keep digging until she finds something, and there seem to be a lot of people out there who want her to find something."

"You're not suggesting we do something about her, are you?"

"I'm thinking it might be better to just tell her the truth."

"Tell an outsider?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Tell an immune. You do that all the time. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

"You weren't a TV reporter. I don't think we'd have much of a pitch to recruit her to MSI. If she's an honest reporter, she wouldn't be up for working for our tabloid, considering that we use it to bury the news. We only tell immunes we want to recruit."

"So everyone you can't use is out of luck, just having to go through life thinking they're crazy?"

"Immunes are fairly rare, so it doesn't come up often," he said, but he didn't meet my eyes, and his cheeks flushed with pink. "Besides, you don't know for sure that she's immune."

"Then we should test her."

“Testing her would mean exposing her to magic. If she’s immune, that might make her even more curious. We want to steer her away, not intrigue her even more.”

“I don’t like lying to her,” I said. “I know she’s right, that she’s seeing what she thinks she’s seeing. It seems wrong to tell her she’s not seeing something that I know is true.”

“Then maybe it would be best for you to stay away from her.”

“It’s not as though I’m seeking her out. We just seem to keep showing up at the same places, since we’re researching the same thing. And don’t say that someone else should take the assignment. No matter who does it, they’re going to end up having to lie to keep the secret.”

“But it may be longer before they have to lie because she won’t recognize anyone else the way she now recognizes you.”

“I guess so,” I said, twining spaghetti around my fork. But I wasn’t yet ready to back out.

I'd thought it would be terrible to lie to Carmen, but keeping things from Owen was even worse. We were about to be married, which meant we should share just about everything and certainly not keep secrets or go behind each other's backs. But I was doing this to help him. As long as there was a risk of magic being exposed, Owen was in danger, and we wouldn't be able to live anything resembling a normal life together.

I wouldn't let my parents dictate whom I married, but I could just hear them if they knew about magic and knew Owen was involved. Even my mother, who was a magical immune utterly oblivious to magic, was likely to get a clue once the secret was out, and there was no telling what that would lead to.

No, we had to stop this before it went any further, and I wasn't about to hand the work over to anyone else. I was already working with Trish, and I could back off on the more public aspects of the job, like going to anti-magic meetings, but I wasn't quitting entirely.

Maybe this fell into the category of a white lie by omission. I wouldn't tell him I was off the case, but I wouldn't tell him what I was working on. It was splitting hairs, but that was the best my conscience was going to get.

Fortunately, Owen was deep into some research project, so I didn't see much of him for the rest of the week. That made it easier to go about my business without feeling like I was deceiving him. Not that there was much for me to do, just monitoring online chatter and looking out for potential trouble spots. The group that had staged the "arrest" stunt didn't seem to have achieved what they'd hoped, and they soon announced the release of their spokesman, which validated my belief that it had been a stunt.

I took his photo from the article on the website to Sam. "I don't suppose you know this guy, do you?" I asked.

"Never seen him before," he confirmed.

"Could you find out if he was taken into custody by the enforcers?"

"You think he was?"

"He's pretending he was, at the very least. Owen didn't think they were real enforcers, and I'm inclined to agree. But I want to rule it out."

"I'll check with my contacts. What do you think's goin' on?"

"I'm starting to suspect that someone magical is behind all this. It may not be an accident that they happen to be getting great footage of obvious magical incidents. They're working with someone who's

staging it. That's who we need to track down. I just wish I knew of a good way to do it."

"We can start by verifying your theory that the capture was fake. And on our end, we can look into some known magical agitators. Usually, that's something that tends to come up in college, all that 'why can't we be open about our powers and rule the world' stuff, and then they get over it when they get a better look at reality. Most magical kids grow up pretty sheltered, in places where they can use their power more openly."

"So Owen's hometown isn't an anomaly?" Owen was from a small town that was essentially a magical enclave. I wasn't sure if nonmagical people would even know it was there.

"For small towns, that's pretty typical, though there are plenty of magical folk who grow up in cities. They're more used to hiding it, and they tend not to be the ones who get the bright idea of going public."

The beginnings of a theory swirled around in my head, but nothing had quite clicked into place yet. I hadn't found all the corner pieces, let alone all the edges, of the puzzle, so the picture was still just a scattering of pieces, with the occasional cluster that might suggest part of an image. I needed to put together a lot more to have the slightest idea what was going on.

I didn't want to talk to Owen about this germ of an idea, and, besides, he'd be the wrong person, as someone who made hermits look pretty outgoing, but if I needed to know who was who in the magical world, Rod was the guy. Not only did his job require him to know everyone who currently worked for MSI or who had worked here in the last several years, but he also recruited from the broader magical community and had an active social life.

I went up to his office and greeted Isabel, who was his secretary. "Is he in and up for a chat?" I asked.

"He's in, and there's no one with him. I'm pretty sure he's always up to talk to you," she said. "In fact, I think he wanted to talk to you about something. Probably to do with the wedding. Go on in."

Before I could, he appeared in the doorway to his office. "I thought I heard your voice," he said. "Just the person I wanted to talk to."

He sounded so eager that it made me wary. "About what?"

"My duties as best man. Come on in." He ushered me into his office and shut the door. "Have a seat." Instead of sitting behind his desk, he sat in the other guest chair beside the one I took. "Now, don't worry, I'm not planning anything crazy for a bachelor party, since Owen would kill me if I did anything too risqué. No strippers, or anything like that. I'm thinking more along the lines of a baseball game."

“He’d like that,” I replied.

“But I was thinking it might be fun to make it a surprise, and that’s where you come in. You can help me set up something to put him on the wrong track, and instead of it being whatever you convince him you have planned, we’ll whisk him away to a game.”

“Why not just take him to a game?”

“Hey, I can’t have strippers, so I’ve got to have some fun with this.”

“I’m not sure that kidnapping Owen is likely to go well, given everything that’s happened to him, and I don’t like the idea of lying to him.” I managed not to wince as I said it.

He gave a deep sigh. “I guess you’re right. I would say that I’ll tell him we’re going to a strip club and take him to the ballpark instead, but he’d refuse to go. But I don’t think you came up here to talk to me about the bachelor party.”

“No. I wanted to talk to you about something else. Sam mentioned that there are known agitators, magical people who go through a ‘why can’t we tell the world?’ phase. Do you have a good sense of who those people are?”

He scratched his temple and frowned. “I know some of them, but it’s not like we keep a list. Why?”

“I’m not having a lot of luck tracking all this anti-magic stuff to the source by going through the anti-magic people, so I thought it could help to look into what some of the people who might want to stir things up are doing.”

“You think magical people are behind this?”

“Maybe. I do think that one group may have been started by an immune who’s trying to figure things out, but then there’s also a militant group that has me wondering—do they really see magic as a threat, or are they using these people to expose magic so they can start being open about it? They always manage to have perfect footage and images of these magical events, and when they staged their spokesman being hauled away, the people who did it looked a lot like Council enforcers, which suggests that someone involved knows something about them.” Although Owen had been sure that black attire was typical of any shady outfit, they really had looked like enforcers to me, and he hadn’t seen them.

“I can look into it, see where the ones I know about are now. The Council keeps an eye on anyone who’s made too much of a fuss. Generally, though, they grow out of it.”

“That’s what Sam said, that it tends to be people who grew up in magical enclaves who get ideas when they go off to school and have to start hiding their powers.”

“I have to admit, that does come as a shock. We weren’t supposed

to openly use magic at school or in public, but in our town, it was mostly an open secret. We did little things all the time—well, everyone but Owen. His foster parents were strict about that sort of thing, and he didn't even cheat when he was away from home. But for most magic kids, you go off to university, and you suddenly can't do anything unless you're in one of the magic secret societies or in your dorm room, assuming your roommate is magical. For a lot of these kids, it's the first time they're around mundane people. It goes to their head that they're different and special, and they hate having to hide it. The magical mentors sit on it pretty quickly, and usually there's a strong enough reaction the first time they try to use magic against mundanes that they see the point in being quiet. We may have power, but they vastly outnumber us."

"That does sound like it might be the attitude we're dealing with here. Even if we don't find a specific person, this helps me put together a profile."

He grinned. "Look at you, sounding like a proper investigator."

"More like someone who's watched too many crime shows. I'm just trying to figure out what kind of person might be behind this, and that will help us know better how to deal with it." I shrugged. "Or maybe I'm wrong and it really is someone who thinks magic is evil and wants to wipe it out. Either way, it needs to be stopped."

"I'll let you know what I come up with. In the meantime, are you doing anything Saturday?"

"Not anything in particular."

"Good, because there's one last band I want you to consider for the wedding, and you won't even have to make it a late night. They're playing at a neighborhood festival, so we can go in the afternoon. It'll be fun—music, food on a stick, a nice spring day."

"I thought we needed a magical band."

"They are magical, but they also play mundane gigs."

"So no elf music?"

"Not with this group. You're right, that would probably be a bad idea at a wedding."

"I guess I'm in for the festival. Have you told Owen to put it on his calendar? You might have to drag him away from work."

"Leave it to me. And you can bring the whole gang, even your roommate who doesn't know about magic. This should be a totally aboveboard ordinary event."

"And the magic words—no pun intended—are 'should be.' You do realize you've just jinxed us, don't you?"

"You pointing that out may unjinx us, so we're good."

I'd kind of hoped Nita would be working Saturday afternoon. In spite of Rod's assurances that this would be a totally normal event that

just happened to involve a band made up of wizards, I was worried about bringing along someone who wasn't in on the secret. But she was free and eager to join us. That meant I had to warn the others that she only knew about the normal wedding back home, not the magical one in the city, so we couldn't talk about hiring the band for the wedding.

It was getting to the point I needed a chart to remind me who I could talk to about what, and I hated it.

On the other hand, Nita's presence would keep the subject of my current investigation from coming up, so I wouldn't have to hide anything from Owen.

I hated that, too. I was basically an honest person, but my job required me to lie to so many people I cared about.

As Rod had promised, the weather was pleasant, warm and sunny, and when we reached the barricaded streets where the festival was being held, it looked like the rest of the city had the same idea we'd had. The place was packed, with barely any room to move between booths. I could hear music in the distance. Meanwhile, the smell of beer and roasting meats filled the air.

Rod led us through the throng toward the stage where the band we were there to see was playing. "One of these guys is an old friend of mine," he said, in what I was sure was the truth but also an explanation for Nita's sake.

"Oh, you know the band?" she said, her eyes lighting up.

"Yeah. But don't get too excited. We're not talking glamour here. They just play local clubs and festivals." With a glance at me, he added, "This is their last booking for nearly a month." Which meant they were available for our wedding date. I knew I should have chosen a band sooner, but I hadn't been able to do much wedding planning while I was undercover with the Collegium and, I had to admit, I'd been hoping to avoid having the kind of wedding reception where there would be a band.

"Hey, it's more exciting than anything back where I'm from," Nita said. "I don't think I've ever seen a band play when I knew someone who knew them. Well, other than the marching band in high school, but that doesn't count because I was in it."

"Wait until you hear them before you start playing groupie," Rod said with a grin. That wasn't encouraging. Maybe there was a reason they were available on such short notice.

I kept a lookout for familiar faces. A magical band would draw a magical audience, so there was a good chance I'd run into someone from work, and there was an equally good chance that it might draw some of the anti-magic forces, especially if they were actually fronts for magical groups.

Right away, I spotted one person I knew and immediately ducked behind Owen. “Ugh, not here, please,” I muttered.

“What is it?” Nita asked.

“An old boss.”

“Which one?” Owen asked.

“The one who turns into a monster when riled,” I said and, for once, I meant it metaphorically.

“Mimi?” Owen said.

Nita rose on her tiptoes and looked around us. “Really? Mimi’s here? I’ve heard so much about her, I’m dying to see her for myself. I kind of expect her to drip venom from her fangs when she talks.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her back down. “Shh, don’t do anything to draw her attention. I don’t want to have to talk to her.” I didn’t know what, exactly, Mimi might remember about our last encounter, which had ended with her being menaced by dragons. If she associated me with that, I needed to avoid her.

“But which one is she?” Nita wasn’t being any stealthier as she scanned her surroundings, but at least she wasn’t sticking her head above the crowd.

“Redhead at three o’clock,” I said.

Her eyes widened when she spotted Mimi. “Yeah, she looks high-maintenance.”

“You have no idea.”

“Owen? Owen Palmer? Is that you?” a voice called out. A female voice I didn’t recognize. My head snapped around to find the source before Owen reacted. It wasn’t that I was jealous or insecure. More like curious. Owen had a hard time talking to women—well, people in general—in social settings, so him running into someone he knew and didn’t work with was a very rare occasion. And, yeah, maybe I was a teensy bit insecure. There was a nasty voice in my head that kept asking me if I really thought I was worthy of a super-cute, wealthy, powerful wizard. I’d gotten better at shutting up that voice by reminding it that I’d more than pulled my own weight in the relationship, but that didn’t mean I didn’t worry the least little bit about women who fit into his world better than I did.

This woman was the kind who tended to feed that worry. She could easily have been a model who just happened to be at the festival for a photo shoot if she’d been about eight inches taller. As it was, she had the build and proportions of a model in a dainty, petite package. She was shorter than me, even in her high-heeled boots that were probably custom made, but she still made me feel short. Her willowy figure and proportionally long legs gave her the illusion of height, but when she kissed Owen on the cheek, she had to stand on tiptoes to do so, and he was on the short side of average height.

“How have you been?” she asked, whisking a shimmering curtain of golden hair back over her shoulder. Amazingly, it stayed put instead of falling forward again, the way my hair usually did. “It’s been ages, hasn’t it? Since graduation, I think. I hear you ended up at MSI.”

He just stood there, staring at her. He blushed a bit, but not enough to indicate that she discombobulated him in a big way. I got the impression he was trying to place her, which I found rather astonishing. What man would forget this woman? Maybe she’d changed a lot since he knew her.

“Don’t tell me you don’t recognize me,” she said with a trilling laugh. “You’ve changed more than I have.”

“Mattie Mayfair?” he said finally, squinting like he was trying to bring her into focus.

“Do you know who that is?” Gemma whispered to me.

“No idea,” I whispered back.

Mattie beamed, showing perfectly straight, white teeth. “Ah, I knew you couldn’t have forgotten me. But I go by Matilda now.” Clutching his arm, she turned to face the rest of us. “We were classmates at Yale. Though I was apparently less memorable to him than he was to me.”

Owen wasn’t beaming. In fact, he looked rather uncomfortable. I got the impression that the pleasure in the reunion was purely one-sided. “Mattie—er, Matilda, this is my fiancée, Katie, and my friends, Gemma, Marcia, Nita, and Philip. And you probably remember Rod.”

Her eyes widened slightly at the word “fiancée,” especially when she realized it applied to me. I suddenly felt dumpy, frumpy, and awkward. Rod spared me from having to come up with anything witty to say by stepping forward, his hand extended, so that she had to release Owen’s arm to shake it. “Good to see you again,” he said. “What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Oh, I went to work for the family firm, of course,” she said.

“Well, it was nice to see you, but we were on our way to meet up with someone,” Owen said.

She pulled a business card out of her designer handbag and handed it to him. “Do stay in touch.” He slipped it into his pocket without looking at it and gave her a noncommittal nod before taking my hand and heading out through the festival. I had to jog a little to keep from being dragged behind him. It took the others a few more seconds to join us.

“Okay, that was interesting,” I remarked. “I take it that wasn’t an ex-girlfriend.”

I felt the shudder that went through his body. “God forbid,” he said. “And I doubt I’d still be alive. She probably bites the heads off

anyone who dares to break up with her.”

“So, not your favorite person.”

“She was a bit of a snob,” Rod, who’d caught up with us, said. “As in, she made the royal family look easygoing and down-to-earth. Then again, she might have more money than they do.”

“But isn’t the queen the richest woman on earth?” Nita asked.

“Okay, I’m probably exaggerating,” Rod admitted. “But still, she was old money and made sure everyone else knew it.”

“I always got the impression that she ran financial background checks before she deigned to speak to anyone,” Owen added. “She probably said more to me just now than she ever did the entire time we were in school.”

“You’ve moved up in the world since then,” Rod said.

“Did she look like that in school?” Marcia asked.

“I think she’s had work done,” Rod replied.

“What kind of work?” I couldn’t help but ask. “Are we talking having inches shaved off her body, her teeth done, a nose job, or what?” If it had been an attractiveness illusion, like the one Rod used, it wouldn’t have worked on me.

“Teeth definitely,” Owen said. “The rest, I don’t know. She’s just, well, different. That’s the best I can do.”

“I take it you won’t be staying in touch,” I said.

He gave a soft snort. “Not likely. One of the best things about being away from school is being away from the likes of her.”

I felt there had to be more to the story than that, and I made a mental note to dig into it later. If she knew he worked at MSI, she had to be magical, and I suspected magic had something to do with whatever issues there were. We couldn’t talk openly about that in public, especially not with Nita around.

We’d barely moved away from Matilda when I saw another familiar face I’d have preferred to avoid. “This day just keeps getting better,” I grumbled.

“Who is it now?” Nita asked.

“Another former boss. Gregor.”

“Wasn’t he . . . ?” Rod began, but stopped himself. We’d learned that Gregor had links to the magical mafia, and he’d been fired, but I guess he hadn’t broken any actual magical laws, so he was out and about. This was the former boss who literally turned into an ogre.

“Yeah, let’s avoid him,” Rod continued. “I was the one who had to fire him.”

“I’m sure there’s a story there,” Nita said.

“One I’m not at liberty to tell because of confidentiality rules,” Rod said.

As we moved through the crowd, I noticed that we weren’t the

only ones avoiding people. Half the people we passed turned away as we approached, and it happened often enough that I didn't think it was coincidence or paranoia on my part. They really were avoiding us. I glanced at Owen and saw that his face was stony, so he must have noticed it, too. I gave his hand a squeeze. The magical community was apparently still suspicious of him.

By this time, I could hear music. It was a jazzy pop blend, like eighties pop reimagined by a forties swing band. "Ooh, is this them?" Nita asked, her head bobbing in time with the music. "I like this." I had to agree.

The stage came into view, and there was a respectable crowd milling in front of it. A few couples danced right in front of the stage, showing off swing moves. Everyone else stood with their toes tapping or their bodies swaying to the beat. With this kind of band at a wedding reception, we wouldn't have to worry about the dance floor staying empty.

Only Philip appeared unimpressed with the music. He scowled as he listened, and his toes didn't tap. I figured his tastes hadn't yet caught up to modern times. He still thought ragtime was rather racy.

But otherwise, I got the impression that everyone enjoyed the music, and that made this an excellent choice for a wedding band. Even I wanted to dance, but I figured that making Owen dance in public would be a bad idea. Instead, I watched the audience and enjoyed those who were dancing.

That's when I noticed the news crew. It wasn't unexpected for there to be television cameras at a festival. I figured there would be some kind of "out and about in the city today" roundup on the evening news, showing New Yorkers enjoying a fine spring day. But then I saw that Carmen was the reporter with the cameraman. Was she here because of expected magical activity, or was this a run-of-the-mill assignment?

I didn't say anything to the others—I couldn't with Nita there—but I went from watching people enjoying the music to looking out for anything that might be suspicious. That included potentially magical things that Carmen would see if she was immune and any sign of magical skullduggery.

There weren't any gargoyles in the trees, and although this was a magical band, I didn't spot anyone in the audience who was obviously not human. There might have been a couple of elves masking their ears under hats, but there weren't any fairy wings in sight. I couldn't see anything that would alarm a magical immune.

I allowed myself a slight sigh of relief, but I didn't let my guard down. I kept most of my attention focused on Carmen. At the moment, she wasn't doing much of anything. Every so often she pointed out

something for her cameraman to shoot, but it all was normal festival stuff. If she was here looking for proof that magic existed, she was in the wrong place.

More couples joined in the dancing in front of the stage. They were professional-level dancers, so I figured this was part of the act, a dance routine to go with the music and show that it was possible to jitterbug to Duran Duran songs. More and more couples left the crowd to dance, and the dancing looked choreographed, not just people moving to the music. "Oh, looks like a flash mob," Nita remarked. "Cool!" She swayed and her toes tapped to the beat.

Owen, Rod, and I all exchanged glances. I'd seen something like this before, when our former nemesis, Phelan Idris, had been causing havoc in the city. He enjoyed magical pranks like making people break out into dance numbers. I felt a tingle as Owen and Rod created a shield around us to protect us from the spell that seemed to be spreading through the crowd. Once Philip realized what was going on, I felt his power join the shield.

Soon, almost everyone but us was dancing. I watched Carmen to see how she reacted. Her cameraman was so intent on filming the scene that he didn't join in, but I noticed his feet moving in the steps of the dance around the camera's tripod even as he kept his eye on the monitor. Carmen didn't move at all. I wished I could see her face more clearly, but she was too far away for me to read her expression. I felt that her not being affected by the spell was a good indication that she really was immune to magic. The question was, would she see this as proof of magic or think, like Nita did, that it was merely a flash mob, possibly a promotional stunt?

"Funny, I always thought those musicals where everyone joins in a choreographed dance were just a movie thing," Nita said. "Who knew that it really happens?"

Fortunately, she was so caught up in the spectacle that she didn't notice that the band members seemed as perplexed as I was. They kept playing, and either they'd shielded themselves from the spell or whoever had cast the spell had left them out of it, because they weren't dancing. I figured it would have ruined the effect if the band had stopped playing so they could join the group dance. They changed the song, slowing the tempo, but the dance barely changed.

Who was doing this, and why? If it was to show off magic for Carmen's benefit, I didn't think this was the best way to prove magic existed. There were too many other explanations, and making people dance hardly seemed like the sort of thing that would make anyone suspect magic. When Idris had done it, it had been to show off his power over people. Forcing people to do things against their will was one of the big taboos in the magical world.

“Do you know where it’s coming from?” I whispered to Owen, who shook his head. “Maybe you’d better get out of here,” I added. “We don’t want you being suspected. And what if worse happens?”

I could tell he was about to protest, but common sense won out, and his shoulders sagged slightly in defeat from a fight he hadn’t bothered to enter. He pulled his phone from his pocket, glanced at it, and said, “It’s James. I need to go find a quieter place to take this.” Rod and Philip nodded, and he slipped away. I was relieved that people kept dancing once he was gone, so it would be clear that Owen wasn’t behind it.

But who was? I looked around for other people who weren’t dancing. Then again, if I were casting this kind of spell and wanted to keep suspicion away from myself, I’d have joined in the dance. The place was just so chaotic, it was hard to tell who was doing what. My best hope of finding the culprit was to get out there and move among the people. Then I might be able to feel the source of the magic.

“I’m going to go get something to drink,” I said. “Anyone want anything?” The ones who were in the know must have figured out what I was doing, for they shook their heads. Nita was so transfixed by the dancing that she didn’t even respond. I slipped away from the group until I was away from the protection of the shields.

My first thought was to look for Gregor. He might have had a grudge against MSI and the magical establishment that would make him want to blow it wide open. Before I could spot him in the crowd, I heard Nita’s voice behind me, saying, “Hey, Katie, wait up! I could use a drink.”

She still seemed to be under the protection of the shield, as she was surrounded by people who weren’t dancing, so I called out, “I can bring you something! What do you want?”

But she kept heading toward me. “That’s okay, I’ll go with you,” she said.

I hurried toward her, but I didn’t reach her in time to keep her from leaving the protected area. First, she bobbed her head as she walked. Then she began swaying. Finally, she was doing a full-on jive, her arms and legs moving fluidly. I’d seen Nita dance before—or attempt to—at school dances and during slumber parties, and she’d never been this coordinated. She didn’t seem at all aware of what she was doing. Like all the others, she was carried away by the magic.

I was torn. I needed to find out who was responsible, and she didn’t seem to be in any danger. But it felt wrong leaving a friend in that state, and the others couldn’t get to her without being affected by the spell, too. With a frustrated groan, I rushed forward and grabbed her by the arm. She didn’t protest. In fact, she didn’t seem to even notice. She just kept dancing as I dragged her back to safety.

Gradually, she came back to herself. She stopped dancing, then just bobbed her head while we walked, and finally she stopped dead still, resisting my tug on her arm. She turned to me, frowning.

“Katie, what the heck is going on here?” she asked.

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I didn't have a good answer for Nita, not one I was allowed to give or that she was likely to believe. After far too long a pause, I said, "I guess you got caught up in the spirit of things. That music really does make you want to dance, doesn't it?" I tried moving a little with the beat, but I was actually with the music, which meant I wasn't in step with the dancers.

"You weren't dancing, not until I said something," Nita said, raising an eyebrow. "And I don't know how to dance, not like this. I might tap my toes, but I was doing fancy stuff, and I don't know how. All these people may be a flash mob, but I didn't get the memo. And yet I knew all the steps. How come it's just our group who seems to be immune to it?"

I glanced to Rod for backup, hoping he knew how to handle this sort of thing. It was my understanding that we were allowed to tell the truth to someone who figured it out for herself, but I didn't know what counted as figuring it out. She hadn't yet said "magic." She just knew something was weird, so I wasn't sure if that was enough. I just knew I had no intention of making something up to explain it away, not when I knew she wouldn't be any kind of threat to the magical world if she knew.

Rod opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment the spell must have broken because the dancing stopped. The few couples who'd been dancing from the start were still at it, but they adjusted their moves to fit the new song. Everyone else drifted away, heading for the refreshment stands, their faces red and sweat dripping from their foreheads. We were lucky there weren't any heart attacks from all that unexpected exertion. Strangely, no one seemed to be aware of what they'd been doing. At least, they didn't seem to find it odd. It was as though they'd been in a trance the whole time. For a moment, I wondered if I'd done the wrong thing by dragging Nita to the safety of the shield. If I'd left her alone, she might have remained as clueless as all the other people, with no memory of dancing.

Then again, I'd been wishing we could read her in about magic for a long time, so maybe this was a good thing. I just hoped the authorities didn't think I'd done it on purpose to give me an excuse to tell her.

Nita glanced around at all the former dancers, now going about their business as though nothing had happened. "Okay, wait, they're acting like this was no big deal," she said. "What is going on here?"

"It's a long story, and we can't really talk about it here," Rod said.

“But I promise, we’ll discuss it later.”

I thought for a moment that she’d get stubborn and insist on talking about it right this minute, but she nodded, scowling. “Okay. Later. But today.”

“Today,” he promised.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

That crisis delayed, I returned my attention to the bigger picture. Had Carmen been the intended audience for the dance spell? If she was magically immune, I doubted that it would have raised the kind of questions it had with Nita. Nita noticed it because she was affected. She knew she couldn’t dance, but had been made to do so. From Carmen’s vantage point, if she was immune to magic (and she must have been, since she’d been unaffected), it would have just looked like a flash mob. It would take more proof to convince her that magic was real, and even more for her to have evidence she could show the world. What would be absolute proof that magic existed?

For me, it had been a serious lecture from Merlin himself, along with a few demonstrations, all in the MSI headquarters, which looks like a castle that no one else seems to notice. That came after me noticing all kinds of crazy stuff happening in the city, like gargoyles that came and went from churches. What would it take for the general public to really believe and not just think it was special effects or an illusion? When there are TV shows about making the Statue of Liberty appear to vanish, it would take a lot to make people think something even that big really was magic.

I figured it would help if someone planted the seeds of doubt. “I just saw someone I know,” I said to my friends. “I’ll be right back.”

I made my way through the crowd toward Carmen, who noticed me before I reached her. “Was that some kind of magic thing, or what?” she asked, gesturing toward the stage as she approached me.

“I thought it was a flash mob,” I said with a shrug.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured, publicity for the band, or something. It was a good idea. But I got another one of those news releases promising a public demonstration of magic today, and I thought maybe that was supposed to be it.”

“Have you considered that someone might be pranking you?”

She grimaced. “Yeah. Maybe. But then there are those things I keep seeing. It’s a pretty elaborate prank if they’re sending me news releases about magic, then staging huge incidents, just for my benefit.” Her eyes narrowed. “And you always seem to be around when these things happen.”

“Hey, don’t look at me about this. I was here to listen to them as a possible band to play at my wedding.”

She grabbed me by the upper arm. “Why don’t you and I go have a

chat?" Her grip was tight enough that I didn't think I could get away without making a scene.

I glanced across the crowd, looking for my friends. I saw them, but they weren't looking in my direction, and there wasn't much I could do to get their attention without Carmen noticing. "I need to get back to my friends," I said.

"This won't take long." She stopped once we were out of earshot of her cameraman. "So, what gives? Are you the one sending me these press releases? Why are you always there when these things happen?"

"Bad luck?" I asked with a shrug. "Why do you think I went to that meeting? Weird stuff seems to happen around me. If you followed me around, you'd see all kinds of things." Too late, I realized she might take that as a challenge, or an invitation, and we certainly didn't need a reporter who was immune to magic following me around. That would be the best way to make the existence of magic public. "But, really, weird stuff happens all the time in this city, and most people don't notice it. I notice it because I'm not from around here, and I don't seem capable of developing the blinders everyone else in this city grows. You've been trained to look out for things that are out of the ordinary, and you probably had some natural curiosity that led you into your profession. It's not so much that we're around when weird things happen as it is that we notice the weird stuff."

"Yeah, but I haven't had people telling me about magic before."

"I have no idea about that. Most people just tell me to mind my own business and stop acting like a tourist."

She snickered, and I realized that I'd broken my personal vow not to outright lie. I knew magic was real and was surrounded by people who lived magic. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed people wearing black moving through the crowd. In New York, that wasn't too odd, since just about everyone wore black, but there was a certain kind of blackness to this black attire that made it stand out. I was fairly certain that representatives of the magical Council were here, investigating public magical activity, and I was glad I'd sent Owen away. "Look, I really need to get back to my friends. We were just about to leave when you saw me."

"You don't know anything about this?"

"I wish I did," I said, telling the absolute truth.

She released my arm. "Okay, then. But if you learn something, you'll tell me?"

"Of course." I hurried away before she could ask me anything else and returned to Rod and the others.

Nita was still scowling when I returned, looking at everything with a skeptical eye. I glanced at Rod, and he said, "It looks like the set is just about over. Want to go meet the band?"

Nita's scowl turned to a grin. "Oh, yeah! But you're not off the hook."

She got ahead of us on the way to the stage. "What did your reporter friend say?" Rod muttered softly to me.

"She wasn't affected by the dancing, so I'm pretty sure she's immune. And she's getting really suspicious about me."

The band stopped playing, but before they had a chance to disconnect their instruments from the sound system, men in black swarmed the stage, and I didn't think they were roadies. "Oops, looks like the Council's already after them," Rod said.

"Then we should probably get Nita out of here. Mysterious men in black won't make that discussion we're going to have to have with her any easier."

"I'm on it." He caught up to Nita. "Looks like we'll have to wait for that introduction. They've got some promoters talking to them."

"Oh, we wouldn't want to get in the way of that."

I tried making meaningful eye contact with Gemma and Marcia because I suspected that we'd have to talk to the Council before this was over, and I didn't want to have to do that in front of Nita. She knew too much right now, and not enough, all at the same time. "I think I saw a snow cone stand back there," Gemma said. "Anyone else want to join me?"

"Ooh, yeah!" Marcia said. "Nita?"

"Yeah, okay," Nita said. "Might as well, until we can talk to the band. Katie?"

"No thanks. Y'all go ahead."

When they were gone, Rod and I hurried over to where the men in black were interrogating the band. I recognized Mack as one of the enforcers and relaxed a little—at least, until he spotted us and came over. "Why am I not surprised to see you here," he said dryly. "What about Owen?"

I was tempted to lie and claim that Owen hadn't been here, but it was a lie that would be too easy to prove wrong. "He left awhile ago, while the dance party was still going on. And he had nothing to do with it, in case you're wondering."

"I don't think he had anything to do with it. That's not his style. But you know what people are going to think."

"We did see at least one former Collegium associate here," Rod said. "Maybe they're trying to get revenge after their operation was busted up."

"That's a possibility," Mack acknowledged.

"And someone seems to be trying to expose magic to that TV reporter," I added. "I think she's an immune, so this could get tricky. Someone's sending her news releases about magic being revealed, and

then things like this happen. We may have to resort to bringing her in on the secret. At least that way we can somewhat control what she knows and get our point of view into it.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Mack warned.

“But we tell immunes all the time,” I argued.

“When we have a purpose for them.”

“But I’m afraid that if we don’t tell her, she’ll find out some other way that might go badly for us.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that because it’s a decision we’ll make,” Mack said. “And I figure I ought to warn you that while I’m not going to try to talk to Owen today, he’ll probably get a visit at the office Monday from Jabez Jones. He’s just looking for something to blame Owen for.”

“Why?” I demanded. “Hasn’t he proven himself time and again? He’s put himself on the line so many times. He’s had chances to take over the magical world, and he’s never abused his power. But you people keep suspecting him just because of who his parents were, and he never so much as met them.”

“I don’t think you understand just how much trouble they caused.”

“Even so, he’s basically Luke Skywalker, and did they hold Darth Vader against him?”

“Interesting analogy. I’ll keep it in mind. Now, you said that reporter was getting news releases. Did she say where they came from?”

“No. I don’t think she knows. Which is kind of odd. You don’t generally get anonymous news releases. People who send news releases usually want you to know who they are. I also don’t know if she’s merely been invited to something that’s been planned or if all this is being staged just for her.” I wondered how much I should share with him about what I’d learned, but then I hadn’t really learned all that much about the various magic watchdog groups.

“Is there anyone else here you find suspicious?” Mack asked.

“Half the crowd is magical,” Rod said with a shrug. “As I said, there were some former Collegium people. A lot of people trying to avoid Owen.”

“My old boss,” I added. “She’s the one who got that brooch last summer. She doesn’t have magic, but it’s possible that she figured out the secret after that experience and now wants to expose it, so she may be working with one of those groups.”

“Okay, we’ll keep an eye on her,” Mack said with a nod. “Which one is she?”

I searched the crowd for Mimi, spotted her, and pointed her out. It was a pity I hadn’t gotten to see her dancing. “And be warned, she can be a nasty piece of work, even without magic.”

As much as I'd have loved to pin something on Mimi, I doubted she was really the one responsible. Even if she was, she'd have to have accomplices. But who was behind it?

There wasn't much opportunity for investigating at the festival. I figured the culprit had probably left when the Council people showed up. That meant I could focus on dealing with Nita. "We have to tell her now, don't we?" I said softly to Rod. "I mean, making excuses for what she experienced would be more morally shaky than just telling her, as far as I'm concerned. It was already silly trying to keep her in the dark."

"I think we're in the clear," he agreed.

"So, do you guys want to take care of it? I'm not sure what I should say, and I can't show her anything."

"Why don't we regroup at Owen's place? I'll give him a heads-up, and you go collect the girls. We do have some experience with bringing people in on the secret."

I found Marcia, Gemma, and Nita on their way back from the snow cone stand. "Ready to go?" I said.

"I guess there's no chance of talking with the band, huh?" Nita said.

"Probably not today. But I'm sure there will be other opportunities." Like maybe at my wedding, which Nita could go to now.

"You're not off the hook, you know," she said. "I'm still waiting on an explanation."

"You're going to get one," I reassured her.

"Today?" she asked. Her blueberry lips from her snow cone made her look rather sinister.

"Today." If I had to tell her myself.

Rod joined us, giving me a slight nod to indicate that he'd briefed Owen. "I just heard from Owen," he said. "He had to deal with something for James, so he had to head home. But he invited us all over. We thought we could maybe get a pizza and watch a movie, or something."

Nita's eyes started to crinkle in a skeptical frown, and I hurried to say, "And we'll talk. Don't worry, Owen's probably the best one to explain everything."

"He's involved in this?"

"Not in what happened today, but he's something of an expert in the field."

"Funny, he doesn't strike me as much of a dancer."

I almost didn't recognize Owen's place when we got there. He must have done a magical cleaning spell because all the usual piles of books and papers on the dining table and sofa were gone. I suspected it

might be dangerous to open the door of the guest room upstairs. "Hey guys, sorry I had to bail on you," he said when he met us at the door to usher us inside.

"Is James okay?" I asked.

"He's fine. He just needed me to look something up for him. So, do we want to order pizza now or wait a little?"

"Talk first, pizza later," Nita said firmly.

"Or we could order pizza, then talk while we wait for it," Marcia suggested.

"Brilliant idea," Rod said, kissing her on the cheek.

We worked out the pizza order, which was probably more complicated than explaining that magic is real, then Owen asked if anyone wanted something to drink or a snack. "No, I just want to know what's going on," Nita said, before any of us could respond. That was probably good, because I think we'd have been tempted to keep asking for things to delay the inevitable, like a little kid demanding a glass of water, a story, and a monster check to delay bedtime.

Owen glanced at Rod, rubbed his hands together, ran his fingers through his hair, then said, "Well, what you experienced today, that was magic."

Nita's head jerked in an involuntary spasm of surprise. "Whoa, that's not what I expected to hear, I've gotta admit. You're kidding, right?"

I suspected that somewhere in the complicated guidelines for discussing magic with outsiders, denial was considered grounds for not having to spill the beans. Owen glanced at Rod, then at me. Both of us nodded. He took a deep breath before continuing. "What did you think it was?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Mind control, maybe?"

"It was. But it was magical mind control. Someone did a spell that made people dance that particular dance."

"And in a kind of trance, so when they snapped out of it, they just felt tired but didn't remember any of it," Rod added.

"Then why didn't it affect the rest of you? And why do I remember it?" she asked.

"Because ..." Owen began, then braced himself to say, "Rod, Philip, and I are wizards. We have some experience with this sort of thing, so when we recognized what was happening, we created a magical shield to protect us."

I chimed in. "Magic doesn't work on me, so I was able to leave the shielded area without being affected, but when you followed me, you lost the protection and fell under the spell. When I dragged you back to the shield, you were protected again. I guess you remembered it

because you didn't experience the end of the spell that seems to have wiped their memories."

She looked around at all of us. "You've got to be joking. Is this all some prank on me? Wizards? Like Harry Potter?"

"Not entirely," Owen said. "For one thing, there's no specific school just for learning magic. We go to ordinary schools. Magic is an extracurricular activity."

"In this country," Rod corrected. "I think there's an elite magic-only boarding school in England."

"We also don't need wands to do magic," Owen said, raising his hand and making a gesture. A bottle of wine materialized in his hand.

Nita yelped and jerked backward, falling against the back of the sofa. "Omigod!" she cried out. "Was that for real?"

Owen touched the bottle with his free hand, and it turned into a bottle of soda.

"No, turn it back into wine, because I think I'm going to need it," she said. She turned to Gemma and Marcia. "What about you? Are you witches, wizardesses, or whatever?"

"'Wizard' is a gender-neutral term," Rod said.

"We're totally ordinary, like you," Gemma said.

"But you know about magic."

"Kind of by accident," Marcia said. "I got kidnapped by an evil wizard, which was a rather rude awakening to the whole thing."

"Normally, we're not allowed to tell outsiders," Owen explained. "There are only exceptions when someone finds out on their own and them remaining in the dark is possibly more dangerous than them knowing."

She whirled on me. "But you know."

"As I said, magic doesn't work on me. I'm what they call a magical immune. That's a pretty valuable trait to magical people, so I work for a magical company. And that's how Marcia and Gemma got dragged into all this. Marcia got kidnapped by a magical bad guy, and Gemma was involved, and they learned about magic that way."

"So this has been going on, all this time, and you never said anything?" Nita said, her eyes flashing.

"I couldn't! I even asked. I knew you were bound to see or hear something, and I thought it would be better to control the way you learned, but they specifically told me I couldn't tell you."

"There are some fairly harsh penalties," Rod said. "Katie could have lost her job. At least this way, we have evidence that you saw a magical working for yourself, so it's not on us. The fault lies with the person doing public magic."

"What about when you were back home last year?" she asked. "Was that what was going on? Those disappearing windows, and those

weird guys who came to stay at our motel?"

I nodded. "Some rogue wizards were in town."

"You didn't say anything then?"

"You didn't notice the magic then."

"I'm pretty sure I noticed weird stuff."

"At that time, I was trying desperately to be normal. It was right after that kidnapping incident. One of my friends had been in trouble at least partially because of my work, and I didn't want to have that happen again, so I didn't want to drag you into it. But there's a lot more magic here, so it's a lot harder to avoid."

She stood and wiped her palms on the legs of her jeans. "I don't even know what to think about this. But I do need to think about it."

"The pizza will be here soon," Gemma called after her as she walked toward the door. "Don't you want to stay and have some?"

"I wouldn't want to infringe on the in-crowd," Nita snarled.

I jumped up to go after her. "Hey, I wasn't trying to leave you out," I said when I caught up with her on the sidewalk in front of Owen's place. "You've got to understand just how big a secret all this is. I wasn't the one to tell Gemma and Marcia. They'd never have known if they hadn't been put in danger."

"You didn't know about this back when we were in school, did you?"

I thought that the fact that she was talking to me was a good sign. "No. I only learned about a year after I got to New York."

"And who told you?"

I gestured with my head toward Owen's building. "Owen and Rod. As I said, me being immune to magic is valuable to them. They apparently noticed me reacting to things I wasn't supposed to be able to see because they use magic to hide magical things. So they had magical things happen around me to see how I reacted, then invited me for a job interview, and that's where they told me the whole thing. Well, actually, I guess their boss really told me, but they got it started." I decided to leave out the fact that their boss was Merlin because I figured that was a little much to deal with, for now.

I put my hand on her arm and was relieved when she didn't flinch away from my touch. "I know this has been so weird, but I'm really glad that you know now. I can quit hiding things. And it's all so very cool. There are wonderful things you'll be able to see and do now that you know. The parties are amazing." I figured I'd hold the news about the magical wedding until she was more adjusted, because knowing she'd been left out of that would be crushing. I knew how I'd feel.

"There are parties?"

"Oh yeah. And magical music, too."

"When you took that weird job not too long ago, was that part of

it?”

“Yeah. It was an undercover assignment.”

“Oooh! Undercover?”

“Yeah, believe it or not, I work in the security department. And one of the things I’m dealing with is that there’s someone out there who wants to expose magic to the world.”

“Would that be so bad, though?”

“It might. The rules to keep it secret require magical people to behave themselves. If it’s not a secret, there’s less keeping them from using their power for bad things. Plus, ordinary people might not react well, and things could get dicey if magical people struck back. Next thing you know, you’ve got an evil wizard ruling the world. Which is why the secrecy rules are so tight. Whoever pulled that little stunt today at the festival will be in big trouble, for multiple reasons.”

“Okay, so telling people like me would indirectly lead to Voldemort taking over?”

“Maybe. I’ve dealt with a few people along those lines.”

“And what does Owen do?”

“Mostly researches the way magic works, which makes him a big-time expert on the subject.”

She glanced back at Owen’s building. “This really is all real?”

“Honest to goodness.” I noticed the pizza delivery guy heading up the steps to Owen’s front door. “Pizza’s here. Want to go back and have some?”

She sighed. “Yeah. I guess so. I’m still not totally over being left out, but I’m also hungry.”

As we walked back toward Owen’s place, she said, “Who do you think is trying to expose magic?”

“I have no idea, but they’re getting bolder, so I’d better figure that out soon.”

I spent most of the weekend answering Nita's questions about magic and reminding her that she couldn't tell anyone. I wasn't sure what would happen if she did, since she wasn't magical and therefore wasn't under the jurisdiction of the magical authorities, but I suggested that she might lose the memory of knowing about magic. I was still a little worried that she'd get excited and blurt something out, but since she mostly hung out with us, I thought we were fairly safe.

But I still had a villain to track down. At work on Monday, I focused my efforts on figuring out who was behind all the public magic stunts. The person doing the spell must have been present at the festival. Dealing with Nita and Carmen had sidetracked me from investigating further that day. Fortunately, we had access to just about every security camera in town. I found the ones in the vicinity of the festival and started watching.

It turns out, doing that sort of thing isn't nearly as easy as it looks on TV crime shows. They show about five seconds of crowd footage, then one of the detectives recognizes someone or spots the person committing the crime. In reality, it's a lot harder than that to pick any one person out of a big crowd unless they're doing something really obvious. You also can't zoom in as easily as they do on TV. You're pretty much stuck with what you've got on the camera, which isn't conveniently focused on exactly the spot you want to see. After watching the entire incident from two different angles and not seeing anyone doing anything that looked like casting a spell, I decided to go about it another way and look for particular people.

Gregor was the obvious first target. He'd always been a bit shady. He'd been kicked out of the research and development department for doing magical experiments that turned him into an ogre when he got mad. Then we'd learned that he'd been affiliated with the magical mafia all along. I wasn't sure how deep his involvement was, but he'd been hired because of that connection, and he'd sided with them when they took on MSI. That seemed to me a good indication of someone who'd be willing to break the magical rules and maybe try to create a situation that would expose magic so he could have power over ordinary people.

Also, I had a very hard time believing that he'd be at all interested in eighties pop played in big band style. Or pop music, in general. Or fun. He had to have been at that festival with an agenda.

I went back through the footage I'd already watched, looking for

him. It would have been easier if he'd had an ogre moment because a green guy with horns would have stood out on the recording. Alas, I spotted no green skin, so I had to look carefully for faces, and his non-ogre face wasn't particularly distinctive. The only thing I had to go on was that he was a little older than the average age of the audience at that part of the festival.

It got a lot harder to spot any one person when the dancing started because then everyone was moving around. I figured that if he was the one doing the spell, he probably wouldn't be dancing, so I looked for him among the few nondancers. One of the cameras showed our group, standing off to the side and not joining in the fun. If I hadn't known us, I'd have been suspicious of us, I had to admit. Owen looked rather convincing when he checked his phone and left. I'd never have guessed that it was a fake call, just looking at the video. I wondered if they'd go so far as to check phone records to make sure he'd really received a call.

When I finally spotted Gregor, I had to back up the recording and watch it again because I couldn't believe my eyes. He was dancing even before the spell hit. Not very well, but he moved with more or less the right steps, and he actually looked like he was enjoying himself. The joy intensified when he went under the spell and his dancing improved, like he was finally able to move the way he'd always dreamed of dancing. For a brief moment, I almost even warmed to him. If he could dance with that kind of joy and abandon, then maybe he wasn't so bad, after all. It wasn't just the spell, since not everyone looked like they were having that much fun. They were all being compelled to dance by the magic, but Gregor was into it.

I sat back in my seat with a grunt. There went that theory. So, if it wasn't Gregor, who was it?

I pulled up footage from another camera. I quickly spotted Mimi, but she moved away from the area around the stage before the dancing began. That could be considered suspicious, I thought. Maybe it meant that she knew what was going to happen and was getting out of there before she was forced to break out in swing dancing. On the other hand, why would she have been there in the first place if she was involved and knew what would happen? She couldn't have done the spell, so why bother? She wasn't the type to show up just to support a coconspirator.

It was a bit scary how often Mimi kept popping up in my life, even after I no longer worked for her. I was starting to feel like our fates were somehow linked. I seemed doomed to run into her every so often. But I had to admit that it was a huge stretch to try to pin something like this on a person who had no magical powers and who'd managed to come out of a day in which she'd been the holder

of a great object of power, had unknowingly hired an elf band for a charity gala, and had ended up trapped in a dragon's lair and still remained blissfully oblivious to the existence of magic. I supposed her being at the festival was just one of those "small world" things.

While I was looking for people I didn't like on the footage, I found myself keeping an eye out for Matilda. I knew Owen had said he didn't like her, and he'd certainly acted like he was not a fan of hers, but I still found myself seeing her as competition, or at least as representing the competition. Owen was considered a great catch by the magical world—at least, before the story of his real parentage came out. I'd seen the flood of baked goods to his foster parents' home at Christmas when all the single women in his hometown wanted to get his attention. Fights had even broken out among women vying for him, though some of that had been magically induced.

But there were plenty of wealthy, beautiful, magical women who would kill to be in my shoes, and I suspected with some of them, that was literal. Was this particular woman a threat? I couldn't imagine that Owen would ditch me for her, but what would she do to try to snag him?

She was hard to find in the crowd because she was so tiny that even an average-sized person could block her. I looked among the dancers, searching for those who were really good, because of course someone like her would be. The perfect swingy blond hair would surely stand out on the recording. She'd be the one who looked like she was starring in a shampoo commercial—not that she'd use the kind of shampoo anyone advertised on television. She was a salon products only kind of girl, and probably those that were exclusively sold in very high-end salons. Heck, she probably had a personal blend, made just for her.

But I didn't see her dancing from any angle I searched. That made me suspicious. If she wasn't dancing, then why not? Had she shielded herself, like we'd done, or was she casting the spell?

I'd started looking for her merely out of misplaced jealousy, but now I wondered if maybe I was on to something. I went back to the camera that showed the edges of the crowd, where the few nondancers stood. Previously, I'd only watched myself and my friends, but now I looked at who else was there. I didn't see her at first, but then a man moved to join the dancing, and behind him was a tiny supermodel with perfect blond hair, and she wasn't so much as tapping her toes.

She was also doing something strange with her fingers. One arm hung at her side, while the other clutched the strap of the purse slung over her shoulder. She moved the fingers of both hands rapidly. It looked like she was playing air piano, with each hand on a different

keyboard. Her lips moved slightly, and I didn't think she was singing along with the song. She was doing a spell.

That was suspicious, but not conclusive. She could have been casting a shield to protect herself from the spell. I backed up the footage to before the dancing began, but I couldn't see her until people moved away from her to go dance. I tried another camera, but I still couldn't tell when she started doing magic, if it was before or after the dancing spell hit.

"Oh, come on, move just a bit that way, please," I softly urged the person blocking my view.

"Does that ever do any good?" a voice asked from my doorway. I turned to see Trish standing there.

"No, especially since it already happened, but I figured it was worth a shot," I said.

"What've you got?"

I backed up the video and showed it to her. "This happened the other day at a festival. Someone did a spell to make everyone suddenly start dancing, and they told that TV reporter that something was going to happen to demonstrate magic. But this woman"—I tapped Matilda's image on the screen—"not only isn't dancing, but seems to be doing some kind of spell."

She leaned over to study it. "Your crowd isn't dancing, either."

"Yeah, because the guys cast a spell to shield us. So I'm trying to figure out if she's also doing a shield spell or if she's the one casting the dancing spell. I can't seem to find a good shot of her before the dancing starts to see when she begins doing the magic."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Her name's Matilda, and she's apparently from a really wealthy, powerful magical family. Owen and Rod know her from school, and they don't like her very much. She was all over Owen when we ran into her, but he said she barely noticed him at school."

"So, you want her to be the bad guy," she said with a grin. "That's one way to take out the competition."

"No, not really. I only looked for her on the footage when I ruled out my other suspects, and I looked for her more out of curiosity than suspicion. That's when I saw what she was doing. But I wouldn't necessarily mind if she's a bad guy."

"Anyone with hair that swings like that has to be at least a little bit evil. Seriously, achieving that degree of smooth, not even the slightest bit of frizz, in this humidity must have involved a pact with the devil."

"I know, right? Maybe I'd better take this to Sam."

I sent a message with the video attached, and was surprised by how quickly I got a response—and how vehement it was. "Don't even think about making accusations unless you have absolute proof," his

message said. "Their lawyers have lawyers, magical ones. We don't want to tangle with them."

I found that even more suspicious, and it only made me want to investigate her more. But I could see Sam's point. If I tipped her off about my suspicions, I'd never stand a chance of catching her. She'd cover her tracks, and she had the resources for a good cover-up.

So, now what?

Research, to start with. I only had what Owen had told me to go on, so I looked up her family name. They owned a lot of property, in Manhattan and elsewhere, but several of their personal properties were listed as being up for sale. Interesting. Were they no longer planning weekends at the beach in resort areas across the globe, or did they need cash? The family business appeared to be travel services for magical people, which included magical hotels and resorts around the world, as well as magical transportation. That might have explained the property downsizing. Why own a vacation house when you own a hotel?

I wondered what made a hotel "magical." Most magical people could conjure up whatever they wanted, so there was no need for room service. About the only way I could think of that a magical hotel might be different from any other was if all the guests were magical, then they could let down their veils and actually be magical people. That might be appealing enough to be worth it. Most magical people had money because their power gave them an advantage, so the target market was pretty high-end.

Still, it was hardly the making of a fortune, unless it was old family money and the business was just a moderately profitable hobby. Unfortunately, magical businesses weren't publicly traded, so there was no financial information available to tell me how the business was doing. I'd reached a dead end, especially since I'd have to be careful about any inquiries I made. These people were probably very well connected in the magical world. Anything I said stood a good chance of getting back to them.

There was one place I could think of where I might be able to get the information I wanted. I headed up to Prophets and Lost. It was a weird department that wasn't entirely reliable, but even if Minerva couldn't use her powers to tell me all about Matilda's family and their business, I suspected she'd have all the relevant gossip. We just needed to be able to talk privately. I trusted Minerva, but I wasn't entirely sure about the rest of her staff.

Minerva was leaning over her crystal ball when I arrived, and it took her a moment to become aware of my presence. "Why, Katie, this is a surprise," she said. "And I mean that. Odd, you're psychically invisible to me."

“All the time, or just now?” I asked.

She frowned. “You’d think I’d have noticed before now if it was all the time.”

“Or maybe there’s never been anything about me you needed to predict.”

“I think I usually read you through Owen, but whatever you’re up to right now, it’s not about him.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. “Not directly, anyway. Can we speak privately?”

“Of course!” She waved her hand, and the door closed. Gauzy red curtains on rods around the room shifted to surround us. “Not only do they set a mood,” she explained, “but they also keep anyone from prying. Now, how can I help you?”

“You know I’ve been working on all these public magic incidents, right?” I began, then went on to explain my progress and my suspicions. “What can you tell me about Matilda and the Mayfair family?”

“I don’t suppose you got any of her hairs, did you?”

“I didn’t get close enough for any to get on me. And that’s if a single strand of her hair would dare leave her head. Why? Do you need something from her for your spell?”

“Having a piece of her body does help, but I was mostly curious about her roots. There’s no way that color is natural. Ah, well, I guess I’ll have to do it the not so hard way.” She waved her hand over her crystal ball, squinted at it, picked it up and shook it, then looked at it from another angle. “There’s a shadow around her, but I can’t quite tell you what it is. I’m also getting a sense of money problems.”

“They have a few of their family properties up for sale.”

“And this would be why. Their problems are quite recent. Something has been severed—a valuable connection, it looks like.”

“A big client or customer?” I wondered.

“Maybe. It was a dark connection, but losing it was bad for them.”

There was one big recent shift in the magical world that I knew of that likely would have serious financial ramifications for some people. “Collegium?” I guessed.

“For that, I’ve just got gossip, not magical insight. I don’t know that Elias—Matilda’s father—was actually involved directly, but I think the Collegium exclusively used their hotels and services for their travel. They were the safe meeting spaces for their business.”

“But we used normal hotels while I was working undercover for them,” I said.

“Because your boss was up to something shady, remember. He was trying to hide things from his boss. And their hotels are mostly outside the United States. They don’t have one in New York. The really

valuable contract was the private airline. You'd think the Collegium wouldn't have needed travel services, given the interdimensional nature of their office building, but they did do a fair amount of traveling. A lot of it may have been for money laundering purposes, though. No Collegium, and the Mayfairs aren't quite raking in the dough the way they used to. As high as they live, they'd feel the pinch pretty quickly. Thus, the sell-off. When you have multiple apartments you don't even use with monthly maintenance fees higher than most people's annual mortgages, it adds up fast."

"Which means they'd have a possible motive for exposing magic. They'd then be powerful over nonmagical people."

"And would have an additional market for their services. Just imagine the appeal of a magical hotel to people who recently learned that magic is real. Or think of what a mundane billionaire would pay to travel magically. I'd say you're on to something. But tread lightly."

"Yeah, I've been warned. I don't suppose you see any evidence of what they're up to?"

"Sorry, hon. And what I see won't hold up in any kind of hearing. I might sometimes be able to point you in the right direction to find something for yourself, but you still have to make a case. And I'd be really careful who you talk to in the Council. Evidence you share with them might end up in a black hole—or worse, it might be twisted around to come back and bite you."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, standing to go. "Thanks for your help, and for the insight."

"You don't have to worry about her and Owen."

"I know."

"You know intellectually. You don't feel it, though." She pounded her fist on her breastbone. "That boy sees no one but you. She may try, but she won't make any headway. I'm not even sure a love spell would work on him."

"That's good to know."

I did feel a little better as I returned to my office. I was sure I was on the right track. Now I just needed proof that people would listen to and that the Mayfairs wouldn't be able to buy their way out of. All I had right now was hints of financial trouble and rumors about their connections that might speak to motive, and some inconclusive video. I wondered what Owen could tell me about Matilda and who she might be associated with. I also wondered if I should involve him at all. I didn't want him getting into any trouble, and I had a feeling his old "friend" would be delighted to bring him down.

I'd barely made it back to my office before I got a call summoning me to a meeting with the boss. Was this about the incident at the festival, or had Minerva betrayed me?

When I arrived in Merlin's office, I thought for a moment that it might actually just be a meeting to discuss the crisis. Only Rod and Owen were there, with no Council representative. Merlin looked pretty grim as he gestured for me to take a seat. "What, exactly, have you lot been up to?" he demanded before I was fully settled.

"Would you care to narrow that down a bit?" Rod asked.

"We don't have time for you to get clever," Merlin snapped.

Before any of us had a chance to respond, the office door opened and Jabez Jones entered. He was as aggressively nondescript as he'd been the previous time. "Ah, you're all here, good," he said and planted himself in the chair at the end of the table opposite from Merlin. That pretty much sealed the deal. This was definitely going to be an interrogation. The fact that Rod and I were also included gave me hope that it wasn't just a witch hunt to go after Owen, but it didn't mean he wouldn't be under scrutiny.

Jones took his time opening his briefcase, pulling out folders, and shuffling through the documents in his folders. After reviewing the pertinent documents, he took out some blank pages and his fountain pen and carefully filled out the top part of his forms. All the while, we sat there, watching. I suspected it was a deliberate tactic to make us nervous. I tried not to let it work on me, but it's really hard to tell yourself not to be nervous. Your brain and body tend to know better, and thinking about being nervous, even if you're telling yourself not to be, only serves to make you more tense.

Owen had gone pale. Before he said so much as a word, he looked guilty. I tried shooting him an encouraging smile, but as uneasy as I was, I was afraid it looked more like a grimace. Merlin sat so still I worried someone had turned him into a statue. I wasn't sure he even blinked as he watched Jones go through his routine. Only Rod looked somewhat at ease, leaning casually back in his chair, his eyes a little unfocused, like he was daydreaming. The white knuckles where he gripped the arms of his chair gave him away, though.

Finally, Jones said, still looking at his paperwork, "Hmmm, it seems that you were present at yet another suspicious event." He looked up, glancing at each of us before settling on Owen. "What can you tell us about it?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Owen said. He was making a valiant effort to appear relaxed, but his voice sounded tight and strained. "We saw what happened, but I didn't see who might have caused it."

Jones waved a hand, and the cabinet doors hiding the television screen opened. The screen came to life, showing video of the crowd at the concert. I recognized the camera angle as one of the pieces of footage I'd been studying. As people around us danced, our group just stood there. "Hmmm," Jones said. "I notice that none of you seem to

be affected by the spell.”

Rod sat up in his seat. “Actually, if you’ll notice, we’re tapping our feet there for a moment. Then we realized what was going on and put up a shield. We had mundanes with us, including one who wasn’t in on the secret. Our shield also blocked those people around us, so we weren’t the only ones unaffected.”

I nearly gasped out loud. I hadn’t noticed that in my viewing of the footage. Matilda was nearby, so was she under our shield, under her own, or causing it all? But no, someone between us and her began dancing, so she had to have been outside our shield. Still, it did cast some doubt on my theory.

“Hmm, you’re implying that there are mundanes you’ve discussed magic with?”

“They’re my roommates,” I explained. “Phelan Idris kidnapped one of them a couple of years ago. That was what revealed magic to them. We merely explained what happened. They’ve been very involved in the magical community since then.” I didn’t know if there was some procedure to follow about reporting that Nita knew now, or if anyone had done whatever procedure that was, so I kept it vague. Theoretically, what I’d said applied to all my roommates, even if Nita had only learned at the festival.

“Hmmm,” Jones said, making a note on his document. “I will have to look into that. Most irregular. Did you get clearance to tell them?”

“As Katie said, they already knew,” Owen said. “All we did was explain what they saw. And it was so blatant that there was no other way to explain it.”

“I will make a note to follow up, but that’s not what we’re here for today.” Jones literally made a note before continuing. “Now, it seems that you, Mr. Palmer, left soon after the dancing began.”

“I got a phone call, and I needed to get away from the music to hear it.”

“A phone call from whom?”

“My foster father, James Eaton.”

“Hmmm. Would you care to show me your call log? I can get your records, but it would be much easier if you cooperated now.”

I felt so sick I was sure I’d turned green. Owen had faked that call, which now was going to look really bad. But Owen didn’t seem to be too bothered as he took his phone out of his pocket and handed it over. Jones glanced at it, said, “Hmmm,” and handed it back before making a note. “Though it seems you left just before that call came in.”

“Are you sure of the time stamp on that security camera?” Rod asked. “It’s hard to imagine it’s kept perfectly in sync with the time on the cellular system. You’re lucky it even registers the correct day.”

“Hmmm, good point.”

“You don’t really think Owen did that spell, do you?” I blurted, unable to hold my silence any longer. “Public displays aren’t his style, especially not dancing. I can’t even talk him into taking dancing lessons so we can do a fancy first dance at our wedding.”

“She has a point,” Owen said, some color coming back into his face as he blushed. “I’m not much for dancing.”

“Hmm, but you weren’t the one dancing.”

“If he doesn’t know how to dance, I doubt he would know the kind of choreography needed to create this kind of spell,” I argued.

Owen blushed even more. “Well, actually, I had to go through a cotillion program when I was a kid, so I theoretically know the steps. I just haven’t done it in years, and I don’t really like doing it.”

Unfortunately, he was too far away for me to be able to kick him in the ankle to make him shut up. I somehow doubted that Jabez Jones was the type to consider that someone that scrupulously honest wasn’t likely to be the culprit. He’d just see the admission as more evidence of possible guilt.

Merlin, who’d remained silent all this time, finally spoke up. “Are you making any specific allegations, Jabez?”

“Merely investigating,” Jones said, sounding entirely unfazed by having one of the most powerful wizards ever irked at him. “But there aren’t a lot of suspects, and Mr. Palmer does look very suspicious.”

I was tempted to mention my theory, but remembered that doing so would probably ruin everything. It was too soon. Only when I had evidence would I dare bring it up in public. It just would have been nice to be able to throw in another name to take some of the heat off Owen.

Jones waved at the TV screen again. “Let’s see what else happens, shall we?”

I tensed, afraid of what was sure to come up next. This video was from an angle I hadn’t seen, and I wondered if he had sources I didn’t. On the screen, I left the group, moving through the dancers, and Nita followed. It was pretty obvious where our shield ended because she started dancing, and I grabbed her and hauled her back. “Your friend seems to have noticed that something is amiss,” he said.

“Yes, because someone was doing unauthorized public magic,” Rod said.

“Which appeared to have some sort of forgetfulness woven into the spell, but Miss Chandler took action to prevent that from working on her friend.”

“Whoa, are you saying it’s my fault that a spell I had no control over, done by someone else, made my friend notice that there was something weird going on?” I asked, leaning forward so intently that

Jones moved back just a tiny bit. That gave me a slight burst of satisfaction. “I was getting her to safety. How was I to know that meant she wouldn’t forget dancing when the spell ended?”

“Hmmm. You told her about magic?”

“The paperwork was filed this morning,” Rod said. “We explained an event she saw and experienced. Whoever did all this is responsible for her knowledge.”

“Hmmm. Surely there was some other way you could have handled it. And I understand Miss Chandler spoke to a television reporter, as well.”

“To get her off the scent,” I said. “She got sent a news release, letting her know that something would be happening. And I can’t believe that we apparently have someone trying to expose magic to the world at large, and you’re far more focused on whether one person who lives among people who are involved in the magical world got told. You’re wasting your time here.”

Jones raised an eyebrow ever so slightly in the closest thing he’d shown to an actual facial expression. “Am I? I seem to be closing in on something.”

I wished I could take back what I'd said, even if I'd meant every word. Now I'd made Jabez Jones mad, and he'd go out of his way to link us to the magical crimes, which meant I'd have to find the culprit, with firm evidence, to help Owen escape scrutiny.

"While Miss Chandler could, perhaps, have put that more diplomatically," Merlin said, his voice icy, "she does have a point. You seem to have an agenda here, one that isn't entirely about determining who is responsible for these public acts of magic."

I held my breath, waiting for Jones's response. All he said was, "Hmmm." I had to sit on my hands to keep myself from slapping the Hmmm off his face. He made a few notes, shuffled his papers, then said without looking up, "You're dismissed."

Merlin flinched ever so slightly, probably because it was rather presumptuous for Jones to dismiss people from Merlin's office. Merlin said, "Thank you for your time, Miss Chandler, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Gwaltney." Only then did the three of us rise and leave the office. I wanted to sprint out of there, but forced myself to walk in a dignified manner. Then I was tempted to attempt to listen in through the office doors because I would have loved to have known what Merlin and Jabez Jones said to each other.

"The doors are soundproof," Trix said when I paused as soon as the doors closed behind us. She took in our angry expressions and said, "That bad, huh? He's going to be a bear the rest of the day. Not literally. Though I wouldn't put it past him."

"What is that guy's deal?" I demanded.

I'd been speaking more or less rhetorically, but Owen answered anyway. "He's investigating something that may be a threat to the magical world." He sounded awfully rational for a person who was the focus of a literal witch hunt.

"Yeah, but if he's zeroing in on you, he's missing the boat, in a big way, which is not going to help anyone," I said.

"It is interesting how he seems to have come to that conclusion," Rod said. "Given that there's no real evidence to tie it to you, other than your presence."

"We don't know what else he's looking into," Owen said. "For all we know, he's making a big deal of investigating me to throw off the real culprits."

That was a possibility, I thought, given what I knew about my main suspect. Were they on the same trail? I had a hard time imagining Jabez Jones having enough creativity to be that devious.

Then again, maybe all his superficial blandness was the ultimate cover for the world's greatest investigator.

Whether or not Jones was being clever, I needed to be. It would be a good idea for me to appear to go after an obvious suspect to hide my real investigation. But who made for a good patsy? Gregor?

"I probably ought to check some of those employee files we dug up on our last case," I said to Rod as we made our way down the stairs toward our respective offices.

"You think someone Collegium-linked is behind this?" he asked.

Boy, did I. But we couldn't talk about that in this building. "I have some theories. Hey, we should all get together for dinner tonight." I turned pointedly to Owen. "Your place."

"It's kind of a mess," he began, but then he realized what I meant. "Yeah, okay. Just us three?"

"For now, I think. I'd rather keep everyone else out of this."

Having a clandestine meeting at his place meant Owen actually left work on time, for a change. I wondered if that might look suspicious. I know if I were observing Owen and saw him leave the office at five, I'd wonder what was going on. Having a wedding to plan gave us some cover, but was it enough?

We picked up Chinese on the way home, and Rod arrived soon after we did. "I suppose you're wondering why I called you together," I couldn't resist saying once we'd served ourselves.

"I really am," Rod said.

"I have a suspect."

"Why didn't you say something when Jabez Jones was grilling us?" Rod asked.

"I'm not really ready to make it official."

"Now I'm intrigued," Owen said. "Who is it?"

"Matilda Mayfair," I declared triumphantly.

I was a little surprised when neither of them protested or said I was totally off-base. "I could see it," Owen said, nodding. "But what makes you suspect her?"

"Did you notice that she wasn't dancing, either? She was just behind us on that video that Jones showed us."

"She might have been shielded by our spell," Rod said.

"There were people dancing between us and her," I said. "Matilda looked like she was doing a spell, but I can't tell when it started, whether she was just doing a spell to shield herself or if she was already doing magic before the dancing began." I pulled up the footage on the laptop I'd borrowed from work. The wizards leaned close to study it as it played.

"Looks like a spell," Owen confirmed. "But I'm not seeing enough of it to know exactly what she's doing."

Feeling somewhat vindicated, I continued. "But there's more. Her family's business took a big downturn after we busted up the Collegium. They're selling off property to make ends meet."

Rod rubbed his chin as he thought. "You think they want to go public with magic?"

"It would open up new markets for them. We've been looking at this as an ideology thing, but maybe it's a simple case of follow the money."

"And if it's some magic watchdog group that busts the secret open, the Mayfairs don't get the blame," Owen concluded. "Even better if they can pin it on me."

"Oh! I didn't think that they might be doing that deliberately," I said. "Do you think she's targeting you?"

"A lot of these incidents have happened when I was present. That's one thing Jones is right about. I know I'm not doing it, but it might not be a coincidence."

"That really complicates things," I said. "I've already been warned to tread lightly and have rock-solid evidence before I speak up, even within MSI."

"How do you plan to go about getting evidence?" Owen asked.

I sighed heavily. "That's the tricky part. But it does get easier if they're targeting you. Then we'll know to keep an eye on you."

"You're using me as bait?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, when you put it that way ..." I teased. "Maybe we could also trace who's sending the information to Carmen, the reporter."

"If I know anything about these people, they'll cover their tracks. They may not be as wealthy as they used to be, but they still have plenty of cash to throw around," Rod said. "They're probably not getting their own hands dirty. Mattie may have been at that concert, but I doubt she's been physically present anywhere else."

"I'll have to check on that," I said. "When I was studying footage from other events, I hadn't met her yet, so she'd have just been a face in the crowd."

"Maybe I should get in touch with her," Owen said. "She gave me her card, so she'd be expecting to hear from me."

"I wonder what that's about if she's framing you," Rod said. "I doubt you'd have even suspected her if she hadn't approached us at the festival."

"I wouldn't have had the slightest idea who she was," I said. "But getting in touch with Owen would make it easier for her to know where he's likely to be. She's been lucky so far."

"Really lucky," Rod said, frowning. "How has she known where you'd be?"

"To and from work is easy," Owen said.

“Yeah, but not the schedule,” I said. “You’re pretty erratic about that. But there was the scuffle at the nightclub—I saw those people who might have been linked to this at the magical club, so it would have been easy for one of them to follow us away from there and start something when we were present. The bike incident in the park and the festival would have been harder to set up.”

“The disappearing car had nothing to do with me, and I’m sure there have been plenty of other incidents where I wasn’t present,” Owen said. “I think it’s more likely to have been a coincidence than a deliberate targeting.”

“Maybe it was, but that may be why she approached you now,” I said. “She may know you’ve been suspected, and now they want to pin it on you. If you meet up for drinks, coffee, or whatever, you can pretty much bet that there will be a big public display of magic nearby.” I gasped as I got an idea. “And it would be interesting if that reporter got called to the same location. That might give us something to go on.”

“So you are using me as bait,” Owen said with a grin.

“The idea of you,” I corrected. “You don’t have to show up. You have some kind of crisis along the way and are running late.”

“It’s still not real evidence,” Rod said. “It might confirm your suspicions, but we’d need to find a paper trail or catch her red-handed, with multiple witnesses and no other good explanation for what they see. And make sure those witnesses can’t be bought. There’s a good chance their stories would drastically change before any hearing.”

“Well, do you have any ideas?” I snapped in frustration.

He shrugged. “Not really my job. You’re the investigator.”

I mulled it over as I picked at my dinner. “I think maybe you should hold off on calling her,” I said to Owen. “You said you were never good friends, and you didn’t exactly act enthusiastic when she gave you her card. It might come across as fishy if you suddenly got back to her a couple of days after you ran into her, and so soon after you were targeted by an investigation. In the meantime, I’ll at least make a show of looking into some of the other known magical agitators. Who knows, maybe I’ll come up with something, but at least it won’t look like I’m focusing on her. If she really wants something from you, she’ll probably arrange to bump into you again, or she’ll track you down and call you.”

“And you should be careful when you’re in public,” Rod added. “You don’t want to be suspected of stirring up trouble.”

“So, I should stay at home or at work?” Owen said, perking up.

“You don’t have to act like that’s a reward,” Rod said.

“I think it sounds lovely, myself,” I said. “We’ve picked a band, so

we don't really need to go out anymore."

"Other than, you know, for fun," Rod said.

"Depends on what you call 'fun,'" I said with a grin.

"We picked a band?" Owen asked.

"Yeah, I liked the one from the festival. I guess I forgot to say anything in all the excitement. Is that okay with you?"

"They were good. People could dance to them, I guess." He grinned. "Even without magic forcing them to do so."

"And you didn't tell me you could dance."

"I was taught. That doesn't mean I can do it."

"You can try for the wedding."

"Yeah, Owen. For the wedding," Rod echoed. He got up and went to the stereo, where he sorted through stacks of CDs, selected something, and loaded it into the machine. A slow big band song came on. "This isn't exactly what you'll have, but the sound may be similar. Let's see what you can do."

I was the one who balked. "He may have been taught to dance, but I never was."

Rod came over to me, took my hand, and pulled me out of my chair. "It's a foxtrot. Very simple. Like this: slow, slow, quick, quick. For you, it's back, back, side, side."

I didn't move smoothly, but we made it around the living room without me falling over or stepping on his feet. When we got back to the dining table, Owen came up behind Rod, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "May I cut in?"

I felt a lot more nervous when he put one hand on my back and took my hand in his other hand. I wasn't sure why, since he was the one I was marrying. I guess I was more concerned about doing it right with him. In spite of his protestations about his dancing ability, he was pretty good, possibly even smoother than Rod. We moved together well. I got so caught up in being in his arms that I was startled when the song ended and Rod said, "There, was that so hard? Should I put on another song?"

"No, we're fine," Owen said before I could answer. I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to stop dancing. It had actually been kind of nice.

"I don't know what your problem with dancing is," I said as we returned to the table. "You were pretty good at it."

"He doesn't like doing things that make him feel like people are watching him," Rod answered for him.

"Then you're in trouble because people will be watching you at your own wedding, no matter what you do," I said. "Just pretend it's a presentation or demonstration for work. You're showing off a spell you developed."

“You know, there might be a market for a dancing spell,” Owen said, and I recognized the dangerous spark of inspiration in his eyes.

“No! Not now. Someone’s obviously come up with a dancing spell. That’s the problem,” I scolded.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a spell to force people to dance. It would just allow people to be able to dance—sort of like training wheels for dancers, or an autopilot. It might be something we could show off at the wedding, a favor for our guests.”

I started to protest, but Rod put a hand on my shoulder and leaned down to murmur in my ear, “Hush. This may be the only way you’ll get him to do a public first dance at your wedding, if he’s thinking of it as doing a demo of his latest invention.”

“He does know it won’t work on me, right?” I replied. “I’m the one who could use some magical help.”

A ringing phone interrupted the conversation. Owen went to answer it. I forced myself to eat instead of straining my ears to eavesdrop. Whoever he was talking to, he didn’t act particularly excited about it. He gave a lot of monotone one-word answers. Probably some kind of survey, I decided. He was too nice to just hang up on them like most people did.

When he returned to the table, though, he looked a little pale, which was a stronger reaction than I’d expect from a survey. “What is it?” I asked.

“That was Mattie,” he said, sounding stunned. “She wanted to get together and catch up.”

“Aha! I knew she was up to something,” I said.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “I can’t imagine any other reason she’d want to get together. If she changed her mind about me because of my success, I’d have thought she’d have contacted me more than a year ago, before all that stuff about my parents came out. If she was being a supportive friend, she’d have reached out last year.”

“Well, what did you say?” I asked.

“I said we could have lunch tomorrow.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Rod asked.

“We were talking about using me as bait earlier.”

I sat up straighter. “Okay, we need to plan for this. Rod, you’re our illusion expert. Can you disguise yourself to be at that place to keep an eye on her? I’m worried about bringing most of the security people in on this, but I may see about getting our formerly homeless guys on the case. They can lurk outside. They don’t know about that family or any of the magical world politics, so we can trust them. She met me—not that I think she paid any attention at all to me—but maybe I can send Trish in. It would be good to have an immune in there. And I’ll check in with Carmen to see if she’s had any news releases.”

“What do you think she’ll do?” Owen asked, sounding amused.

“I’m worried she’s setting you up to be the patsy for the latest magical demonstration. Which is why you’re not going to be able to make it to that lunch.”

We didn’t have a lot of time to put our plans in motion. I backed down from the idea of bringing our new recruits in on the operation, mostly because I didn’t want to put them in the position of hiding things from Sam. But Trish eagerly agreed to go to lunch at the selected restaurant, and Rod didn’t have to be persuaded to disguise himself and keep an eye on Matilda.

My part of the plan was a little more challenging. I had to come up with a good reason to contact Carmen and ask her if she’d heard anything more about magic events. The tricky thing was that I’d downplayed all her suspicions. Why would I ask her for updates on something I’d showed no signs of believing in?

The solution came when someone handed me a flier just before I entered the subway station on the way to work the morning of Owen’s lunch. I glanced at it and saw that it was a notice about a “Public Event that Will Change the Way You See the World” scheduled for that evening at City Hall Plaza. That sounded like an excuse to call Carmen.

I’d already programmed the station number into my cell phone, and once I got to my office, I called it, hoping she’d be at work. She was. “Hi, this is Kathleen. From the meeting and the concert,” I said, hoping she’d remember me.

“Yeah. Hi. What’s up?” she said, sounding wary.

“I’m sure it’s going to be something silly, but I just got a flier for some public event at City Hall Plaza this evening and was wondering if you’ve had any news releases tipping you off about anything lately.”

“Nope. Do you know what the event’s about?”

“Just something that’s supposed to change the way you see the world.” But the proximity to MSI headquarters was a little worrisome. “I guess they stopped sending you news releases, huh? Nothing else going on today?”

“Not that they told me about. Are you planning to go to the thing tonight?”

“I may check it out, just out of curiosity. It’s near where I work.”

“Maybe I’ll see you there.”

“Maybe.”

I ended the call, feeling some relief about Owen. If Matilda was behind all this stuff, and if she was going to frame him, she’d have invited the reporter to be present, I was sure. Maybe she really did just want to catch up with an old classmate. Maybe her family losing its money and prestige made her more sympathetic with Owen’s

situation. Maybe she was trying to recruit him to the dark side.

About an hour before Owen's meeting with Matilda, I went out to walk the perimeter around the restaurant area and make sure nothing had been hidden magically. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or even more worried when I didn't come across anything untoward. No magical creatures skulked around outside the restaurant. I didn't see any people I recognized from the anti-magic meeting or any other events. I was probably the most suspicious-looking thing around, as I lurked so that I could watch the doorway and maybe get a glimpse through the windows. I saw Matilda arrive, her perfect blond hair swishing back and forth behind her shoulders as she walked. She was a bit early, but Rod and Trish were already in place.

Now to see what she'd do. This was about the time that Owen was supposed to call and apologize about something coming up.

Therefore I almost blew my own cover when Owen approached the restaurant and I barely stopped myself from shouting, "What do you think you're doing? That wasn't the plan!" Okay, so there were no reporters present, and I didn't see anyone who looked like they might be ready to cause trouble, but that was no excuse not to follow the plan. And he accused me of being reckless!

I just had to hope that Rod and Trish would be able to manage whatever happened inside. I couldn't see either of them from my position, but I did see Owen take the seat across from Matilda. It was sheer agony waiting through the lunch. I felt like the poor little match girl, watching through the windows while they lingered over a fancy lunch as I ate my sad sandwich alone outside. I knew that whatever his reason for not sticking with the plan, it was only for work, but I still didn't like it. I was no longer at all jealous, but I was angry about him being used. And I was sure she was using him. The only question was how and why.

I felt like at least two hours must have passed before they emerged from the restaurant, him gallantly holding the door for her. She did that double air kiss thing that struck me as awfully pretentious before they went their separate ways. I was torn between following her and confronting him, but he approached me after she got into a cab, which settled the issue.

"What were you thinking?" I demanded. "The plan was that you weren't going to show up."

"Change of plans," he said, but the flush that spread upward from his collar contradicted his nonchalant tone. "It was pretty clear that nothing was going to happen. The meeting wasn't public enough for a big magical event they could pin on me, there were no media present, and it looked like your sweeps of the surrounding area hadn't turned up anything. So I figured the meeting was about something else, and

we might as well know what it was.”

“And?” I prodded.

“And it wasn’t about anything, at least, not that I could tell. She just wanted to catch up.”

“But I thought you were never friends. What was there to catch up about?”

“We did have some classes together and had mutual friends. We mostly talked about them, where they are, what they’re doing. She asked about the wedding.” He gave a slight smile. “She was rather surprised that I had the nerve to propose to anyone, since I was apparently notorious in school for being too afraid to even ask anyone out.” He started walking, heading back toward the office, and it took me a moment to mentally and physically catch up with him.

“So she really just wanted to talk about old times that you two never actually had?”

“I guess she noticed me more than I realized. Apparently, I was the source of a lot of gossip and speculation. More girls than I realized were interested in me, but they got frustrated when I didn’t catch any of their hints. It seems I could have had a very different social life than I had. But then I probably wouldn’t have done as well in school if I’d been distracted.”

“Really, all she wanted to talk about was how cute you were in school and how surprising it is that you’re getting married now?”

He shrugged. “Maybe she’s changed since then.”

I started to remind him of what we’d learned about Matilda’s family, but that wasn’t something to discuss in public. Was it possible that she really did just want to catch up with an old acquaintance? Something about this struck me as odd, and I doubted it was just insecurity on my part. Unfortunately, it was difficult to dig into it without sounding insecure.

Rod and Trish arrived back at the office not long after we did, running into us while we were still in the lobby. For a moment, I thought Rod was going to tear into Owen about going against the plan, but he stopped himself. “We’ll talk later,” was all he said, though his glare was furious. “Shall we gather at your place tonight to discuss this?”

“I can’t tonight,” I said. “I’ve got something to deal with.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Owen said. “Turns out it was a false alarm, just a lunch to catch up.”

“Catch up on what?” Rod asked.

Owen ignored him, saying, “What is it that you need to deal with?” to me.

“There’s another one of those anti-magic rallies, and I ought to check it out. I doubt it’s the big unveiling because it’s not likely to get

a lot of attention. Carmen Hernandez didn't even get a news release about it."

"We'll need to stake it out, anyway," Owen said.

"You'll go nowhere near it," Rod said, and I was glad he had so I didn't have to. "You will stay safely at the office until we give you the all-clear. I don't even want you going home. I want you here, with witnesses."

"Yes, sir!" Owen said with a mock salute. "Even though I don't report to you. At least, not last time I checked."

"It's for your own good," Rod said.

"Or do you want to sit through another interrogation, hmmm?" I added.

The "hmmm" apparently served as a wakeup call, for he immediately said, "I have some things I want to work on this evening, anyway. The rest of you have fun."

He headed for the stairs, and Rod turned to me. "What happened today?"

"You probably know more than I do, since you were inside," I said. "He just told me they chatted about old times and what's going on with him now. What did happen in there?"

"Nothing that I could tell," Trish said. "It just looked like a casual lunch. They weren't overly friendly. He was pretty reserved. She was flirty, but in that way that looks like it's just her natural way of dealing with people. There was a little battling over the check, and I suspect she used magic to win it. I wasn't close enough to hear what they said."

"I was, or I should have been," Rod said. "But all I heard was a constant murmur, nothing specific. I think they were using a privacy spell. You wouldn't notice it unless you were trying to eavesdrop on that one particular table. Otherwise, you hear a blur of restaurant sound."

"Why would they have needed a privacy spell if they were just catching up on old times?" I wondered.

"You don't think he's lying about what they discussed, do you?" Trish asked.

I shook my head. "No. He can't tell a lie to save his life."

"That's the truth," Rod said. "Maybe she's just automatically paranoid. I do know of magical people who make it a habit to mask their conversations in restaurants. It's a New York survival strategy."

"Must be nice," Trish said. "Even better would be to make it so you didn't have to hear anyone else."

"We can do that," Rod said, "but I'm afraid it wouldn't work for you, unless it's a true sound barrier. So, what do we do about this?" He gestured with his chin toward the stairs where Owen had gone.

“I’m worried,” I admitted. “Maybe this lunch was just to get his guard lowered. Then she can invite him somewhere else where something will happen.”

“Yeah, I don’t believe in a million years that this was just catching up. I’ll keep an eye on him. Maybe you can keep him busy.”

“With the wedding, that won’t be hard. Now I’d better let Sam know about that thing tonight in the plaza.”

Trish and I went back outside to where Sam sat in his usual post on the awning. When I showed the flier to Sam, he gave a low whistle. “Well, now, they’re getting into our territory. I don’t think it’s an accident that it’s so close to our headquarters. They’ve gotta be up to something. And we’d better be ready.”

We went into high gear to prepare for the event advertised on the flier. Gargoyles searched the city, seeing how far and wide the fliers were distributed and if any similar events were being planned elsewhere. When we got the report that this seemed to be the only event and that it had been promoted throughout the city, Sam ordered half of his forces to stay around the office building.

"You think this is a pretext for attacking here?" I asked.

"I think it's an excellent way to draw our people out to the plaza, leaving the building vulnerable. But don't worry, we'll still have plenty of folks keepin' an eye on the plaza."

"Remember, there's a good chance that some of these people are magical immunes," I warned. "That's probably why they see magic stuff. Your veils won't work on some of them."

"That's why you're one of the folks keepin' an eye on the plaza. The gargoyles will be minding the fort back here, but we'll be ready to swoop in if you give the word."

"That would be an extreme last resort. And maybe it's what they want us to do. They might be goading us into showing ourselves."

A crowd had already started to form near the fountain when I left the office. I recognized a number of MSI people, including Rod and Trish, mingling among the crowd. Fortunately, there was no sign of Owen. I wondered if Rod had resorted to handcuffing him to his desk or if Owen had merely been sidetracked by some project. In spite of him being warned to stay away, I wouldn't have put it past him to show up, in case he was needed.

Since I'd gone to that one anti-magic meeting with Trish, I figured it would make sense for me to be seen in public with her, so I wandered over to her. "Fancy meeting you here," I said.

"There are more people here than I expected," she said.

"I never thought anyone actually read those fliers."

"I wonder how much is the fliers and how much is people seeing a crowd and stopping out of curiosity," she said, scanning the plaza. "It is going-home-from-work time." She dropped her voice to add, "See anyone you know?"

I was shorter than she was, so had a harder time seeing beyond the heads and shoulders of the people around me. I did a double take when I saw a familiar head of curly red hair: Mimi. It made sense for her to be drawn to an event like this, given her experiences, I supposed. I couldn't tell if she was involved with the event or just a curious bystander. Someone climbed up to stand on one of the

benches by the fountain. She wasn't familiar, but I recognized a woman standing near her. "Yeah, the person who tipped me off about all this in the first place." I felt like I'd come full circle. Oddly, this was the first time I'd encountered her since the bridal sale. She hadn't been at the meeting or the demonstration at Union Square. Did that mean this was a different faction?

The woman standing on the bench was tall and thin, with long, straight graying hair held back from her face with a hairband. I wondered if looking eternally middle-aged was a common trait for those who believed magic existed and wished it didn't, because she reminded me of the guy from the other meeting. There had to be a certain humorlessness about someone who wanted the world to be less magical, and it was a good reminder to watch my own attitude. I was way too prone to wishing things were more normal. It was easy to get so caught up in facing the latest magical threat that I forgot to think of how amazing it was that magic was real and I got to be a part of it.

The woman raised a bullhorn to her mouth, cleared her throat, and called out, "Can everyone hear me?" There was a general murmur of confirmation. "Well, um, good. I'm sure you're all here because you're seekers. You want the truth. You've heard things, seen things, and everywhere you turn, all you get are denials. No one believes you. Even if they see something for themselves, they deny it. And, of course, the authorities treat you like a crackpot. It's enough to make you wonder what you really saw, to make you doubt your own eyes."

"Sounds like an immune to me," Trish muttered, and I nodded in agreement. I wondered if telling this woman the truth would stop all this. Maybe it wasn't so much that she was opposed to magic as it was that she was tired of not being believed.

"Well, today we're going to change all that," the speaker declared, her voice going shrill with emotion. The bullhorn amplified that, making her unpleasant to listen to. People started drifting away from the plaza. Seeing her audience departing made her get even more strident. "I'm here today to tell you that magic is real, and I'm going to prove it to you."

That got the attention of the people just passing through the plaza, going to and from the nearby subway station. I looked around for any sign of reporters and didn't see any TV cameras. I thought I saw Carmen, in incognito mode, the way she'd been at that previous meeting, and without her camera crew.

"Yes, I said magic. Not pulling rabbits out of hats or sawing women in half, but real magic. And believe me, it is real."

I heard a few snickers around me. One person muttered, "It's probably some kind of promotional thing. We'll find out it's about a new movie, or something." But a few people listened intently, Mimi

among them.

“Magic is all around us in this city. There are magical creatures living among us. There are wizards manipulating the world to their own ends. Great magical battles have happened right here, and most people remain oblivious, probably because the magical people fog their minds, keeping them from noticing. But we’ve been documenting it all, every incident, with as much evidence as we can find, and we’ve been studying the patterns of the way magic is used.”

That had to mean they knew more than they’d posted on their blog, because I hadn’t been able to find any patterns, in spite of knowing the truth. Or else someone who did know something had tipped them off.

“We’re in the part of the city that’s the core of magic here,” the speaker went on, and I tensed. That sounded like she knew about MSI headquarters. The location of this event hadn’t been accidental.

“There’s a building that isn’t always there, or that only some people can see, and it’s the seat of magical activity in this city. But tonight, you’ll see it all when the moon passes overhead a few minutes from now, lifting the magical veil that hides it from the world.”

Trish and I turned to look at each other. “Seriously?” she said, a corner of her lip turning up.

“I’ve never heard that the moon has anything to do with it,” I said. “But then, it wouldn’t make any difference to me.” I looked for Rod in the crowd, but I’d lost him, and this wasn’t really a conversation we could have here. I’d thought this was the faction that wasn’t being run by magical people. If they had the magic to drop the veils on MSI’s building, then I’d misjudged the whole thing.

I moved to the fringes of the crowd and called Sam. “It’s not an attack,” I whispered into the phone. “I think they’re going to drop the veils on the building.”

“Got it.”

“Soon,” I added. “Something about when the moon passes overhead. Is that a thing?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard. It’s probably just showmanship. But we’re on it. Thanks for the tip, doll.”

The woman was still bellowing through the bullhorn about all the strange things that existed in the city that no one else could see, and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. It was clear that she was magically immune, and if only someone had managed to catch that and explain it to her, I had a feeling she’d be a much happier person now. As it was, I wondered if it was too late. She already believed the truth, so would it do any good to bring her fully in on the secret? Would it make her hate magic any less if she were part of it?

I was still musing on the topic, heading back toward Trish, when

Carmen stopped me. "You came," she said.

I shrugged. "I work nearby, and I walk through here to get to the subway, so I thought I might as well stop and see what's going on."

"None of this makes any sense," she said, shaking her head. "What is she saying about a disappearing building that doesn't seem to belong here? That castle-like building has always been over there." She pointed straight at the MSI building. "And I don't think it's Magic HQ."

I didn't know what to say to that. I wasn't supposed to admit that I saw it, but I didn't want to tell her I couldn't see it. "It's easy to miss if you're not looking for it, I guess."

"But what's the big deal?"

"I have no idea." That much was the truth, but for entirely different reasons than she probably suspected.

The woman with the bullhorn paused dramatically, looking up at the sky, then turned and pointed. "There!"

I didn't know that the crowd would get too excited about seeing a building they'd never noticed before, but I did expect some reaction, at least a few double takes when it suddenly appeared or changed, or whatever would happen when the veils dropped. Instead, people just stared like they were waiting for something to happen, and when it didn't, they began wandering off, going about their business. That got the speaker really riled up. "Don't you see it?" she shouted, loud enough to overload the megaphone. "The veils dropped, and there it was!"

"It was always there," Carmen said, shaking her head.

I thought about telling her the truth, but I realized I had no proof. Being able to see a building wasn't exactly evidence of magic, and she didn't seem to notice that no one else in the crowd could see it. "I guess this was a bust, huh?" I said.

"I'm just glad I didn't pitch this as a story or bring a crew. I'd have been a laughingstock. It's just another crackpot. We really need to do something about the mental health system in this country." With a halfhearted wave, she said, "Catch you at the next big magical exposé."

"Yeah. One of these days, maybe it'll be the real thing," I said.

"Ha! As if!"

I was still watching her go when someone grabbed me by the arm. I whirled to see the woman from the bridal sale. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Excuse me?" I said, all the Texas in me coming out with a vengeance. Even I was a bit surprised by how many syllables I managed to fit into those two words.

"You're the one who made it fail."

“Wait, you’re blaming me for whatever you were trying to do failing?” Okay, so it had kind of been my fault, but I was indignant enough about being blamed to sound somewhat genuine.

“I heard you on the phone, talking about veils.”

How had she heard that? I hadn’t been that close to her, and I’d whispered. She must have been right behind me, and I hadn’t noticed, or maybe she could read lips. “I’m planning a wedding, remember?” I tried to pull away from her.

She tightened her grip on my arm and dragged me toward the fountain, where the speaker was still berating the dwindling crowd. Trish moved toward me, as though to intervene, but I caught her eye and shook my head slightly. I didn’t think I was in immediate physical danger, and I was curious what was going on. This might be a good way to find out.

“She’s the one who did it!” my captor said when we reached the speaker. “I heard her on the phone, warning them about the veil dropping. And she was at the incident at the bridal sale. I should have known she was one of them.”

“I told you, I was talking about a wedding veil,” I said, wrenching my arm out of her grasp. “I was just buying a wedding dress at the sale. Which is why I was talking about veils. I’m not sure if I should go with one or drop the idea and do something different.” Even though that hadn’t been what the phone call had been about, it was kind of the truth. I hadn’t found a veil style I liked and was wondering if not using one would give my mother a heart attack.

The crowd had shrunk to the point it was just the true believers left, along with Rod, Trish, and a few other MSI people who hung back. Even Mimi was gone, much to my relief. The last thing I needed now was her identifying me. I hoped none of the MSI crowd did anything drastic that would end up revealing magic. The speaker glared down at me from her spot standing on the bench and lowered her megaphone, speaking without it. “Are you the reason my demonstration failed?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not sure what you thought you were going to show us or why it didn’t work.” Which was somewhat true, since I didn’t know what Sam had done to keep the building from being revealed.

“It’s easy enough to tell if you’re lying,” the speaker said. “Bring the tester.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Trish and Rod take a step closer, but I shook my head slightly. Although we were getting dangerously close to “burn the witch!” territory, unless they did something silly like throw me into a pond to determine whether I sank or floated, I figured I’d be okay, since I knew I was about as far away as you could

get from being a witch.

A man in the group brought over a device that looked a bit like a Geiger counter, and it seemed to work in a similar way. He waved the wand extension around me while looking at a dial on the device. After a few passes of the wand, he frowned, tucked the wand under his arm to free his hand, and gave the device a thump. He tried again and shook his head. "She's not a witch," he said. "In fact, she's ... well, I've only seen readings like this once before."

"Are you sure it's working?" the speaker asked.

He waved the wand around his own body, checked the dial, then waved the wand around me again. "It's working. It's just ... I think she's like you. She's pure."

The speaker stepped down from the bench and took my hands in hers. "Is it true? There's another who is utterly pure of the taint of magic?"

This sounded close enough to cultish to make me nervous, so I caught Trish's eye. Now was a good time for an intervention, as long as it wasn't magical. "You people are nuts," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're untouched by magic," the speaker said. "That allows you to see the truth. Together, you and I could spread the word to help others see the truth."

"Kate! There you are!" Trish called out. "We're going to be late. C'mon."

"I'm sorry, I have to go," I said, pulling my hands away.

I wasn't fast enough. The woman caught my wrists. "But we need you. We could show you the truth, and then you could help us tell others."

"Um, can I think about it and get back to you?" I said.

She released my hands, reached into her pocket, and pressed a card into my hand. It was the same business card the woman at the sale had given me, which suggested that maybe the speaker was Abigail Williams. Now I really had to wonder whether it was a pseudonym or if she'd lived up to the name she'd been given. "If you give this any thought, I know you'll call us."

"Yeah, okay, thanks," I said, taking a step away from her. "I'll definitely think about it." I hurried toward Trish before she came close enough for that device to get a reading on her. I didn't know what these people would think about finding yet another immune.

"You okay?" Trish asked when I reached her. "Those people looked pretty intense."

"They let me go, which is a good sign."

"So, back to the office?"

I glanced toward where the speaker and the bridal show woman

were still eyeing me. “Not yet. I don’t want her to see me going into the building she thinks of as the headquarters of magic.”

Instead, we headed into the subway, where Rod soon joined us. “Are you okay?” he asked. “I wasn’t sure what to do when she grabbed you.”

“I’m fine, and you were right to hold back. We need to talk about this, but not here, and I don’t want to go near the office until those people are gone, and until we’re sure they’re not watching me.”

“Let’s head to my place,” Rod said. “I’ll call Owen and some of the others to meet us there. It’s not as big as Owen’s place, but, as far as I know, no one’s watching me and I’m not under suspicion from any faction, so it should be safe.”

Rod lived in a modern high-rise, in what could politely be called a bachelor pad. When we arrived there, I realized that he’d toned it down quite a bit since the last time I’d seen it. Even so, it was playboy enough for Trish to roll her eyes at the leather furniture and all the chrome. “It used to be worse,” I whispered to her.

Sam reached us first, landing on the balcony railing, then hopping in through the open sliding door. “Thanks for the alert, doll,” he said. “I think we could have fought their spell, but the early warning kept us from being caught with our pants down even for a second. We were able to shield against any dampening spell, and it was a pretty powerful one.”

“I thought it was the other group that was being secretly run by magical people,” Trish said. “This one’s the one run by a magical immune who’s frustrated that no one sees what she sees. They shouldn’t have been able to drop the MSI veils, should they?”

“Not if they don’t have magical powers,” Sam said.

“She seemed to think it was some kind of natural phenomenon that would disrupt the magic, something about the moon passing overhead,” I said. “That sounds to me like someone’s messing with her.”

“It seems there’s a lot of cross-pollination between the two groups,” Trish said. “Maybe the magical people tipped her off, with an explanation, and then they were ready to make it happen with their magic.”

“My, aren’t you the devious one to think like that?” Sam said. “But, yeah, someone with some serious magical chops had to be involved, whether or not these people were aware of it.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I could use a drink,” Rod said, turning to his well-equipped bar.

I sank onto the sofa, suddenly feeling weak. I’d been too busy thinking at the time to be truly scared, but now that I was safe, it was hitting me just how potentially dangerous that situation had been. If

Trish hadn't been there, would they have kidnapped me? "I don't suppose you've got something with chocolate in it," I said. "Because I need a drink, and I need chocolate."

"I know just the thing. Trish?"

"Can you do a martini?"

"I should take offense at that question. Of course I can do a martini. Have a seat and make yourself at home. It may take Owen awhile to get here, and there's no point in talking about it until then, or we'll have to repeat ourselves."

While Rod mixed up drinks, I said, "Do you have a computer I could use?"

He gestured toward the laptop on the coffee table. "It'll automatically connect to the network," he said.

I looked up the Abigail Williams blog to see what they had to say about the event. They were promoting the big, public demonstration, but hadn't yet reported on what had happened. I hadn't noticed anyone photographing me, but I wondered if finding a new "pure" one would count as news. They hadn't said anything about the founder being "pure," so maybe their public anti-magic crusade was separate from their quasi-religious cult. The other big blog, which I suspected was related to the other group whose meeting I'd attended, didn't mention the event at all.

Owen arrived a lot sooner than I expected, which made me worry about what he'd done to ensure that kind of rapid travel. Speeding up subway trains when people looking out for magic were nearby wasn't a great idea. "What happened?" he asked as soon as he entered. "I assume we were successful in protecting the wards. We had to do some quick thinking."

"I couldn't tell, obviously, but most people acted like it was a big bust and walked away," I said. "You were involved with that?"

"It was an emergency all-hands-on-deck situation. Everyone in the building concentrated on maintaining the veils. I need to work on some safeguards for the future. We've never worried about our veils being attacked before, but it seems to be a possible threat now."

"We're already lookin' into it," Sam said. "We're switching up a few of the spells, so it should snarl up their next attempt."

"But the real news is that Katie seems to be the new prophet of an anti-magic cult," Trish said.

"What?" Owen blurted.

"The woman from the bridal sale was there, and she recognized me," I said. After a few sips of the chocolate concoction Rod had produced, I was relaxed enough to calmly discuss the frightening situation. "She heard me talking about veils when I called Sam to warn him and dragged me in front of their leader to accuse me. They

thought I was a magical person sabotaging them, and they decided to test me. I seriously thought we were heading into witch trials territory, but they had this device that seemed to register magic, and apparently it gave an unusual reading for me, a reading they only get from their fearless leader, who I'm pretty sure is an immune."

"What kind of device?" Owen asked.

I described it to him, as well as I could without knowing how it worked. "I guess maybe it reads magic from people? Their baseline must be set for ordinary people, and the needle goes over to one side for wizards and drops to the other side for immunes."

"Hmm. I'm pretty sure I have an idea of how that could work, theoretically. I haven't considered building something like that. We use other tests for magic."

"Invent later. Focus now," Rod said. "It looks like we've got a chance to get someone really on the inside of that group. We might be able to get a sense of where they're getting their information."

"I'm not so sure I'm keen on going in as the new chosen one," I said. I downed a big swallow of the chocolate martini to try to erase that mental image.

"Seems to me like that would really give you the scoop," Sam said. "They aren't going to hide stuff from the chosen one, are they?"

"Let's go back a step. Don't you think that if they were being manipulated by wizards, they would know it?" I argued. "They have a wizard detector. I'm probably not going to find out which wizard is behind this from inside this group."

"They may be getting tipped off by that other anti-magic group, and you could track that connection," Trish said.

"I have to agree with Katie," Owen said. "This group sounds awfully cultlike, and getting caught up in that could be dangerous, even as the new chosen one. Maybe especially as the new chosen one. Bad things happen to chosen ones if they fall off their pedestals."

I didn't know if he'd done it on purpose, but that made me want to do it. He hadn't listened to me about the danger of meeting with Matilda, so I wasn't inclined to listen to his cautions. "Then again, it might be our best shot," I said. "I'm going to have to be careful no matter what, since Abigail Williams, or whatever the leader's name is, is an immune and she knows about our headquarters. They could be staking the area out to identify people who come and go, and they'd notice if I'm among those people. If I have to be careful, I might as well use my chosen one status to see what I can learn. They may not know they're dealing with wizards, but I do, and I might recognize someone. I might even get evidence against them."

Owen scowled, and I said, "It's not like I'm going to be in any danger of being burned as a witch. I'll be the one deciding to do the

burning!”

“Besides, it’s her job, and I’m her boss, so I decide what assignments she takes on, and I think Katie-bug should do this,” Sam said.

“There, that settles it,” I said, but I felt more queasy than triumphant. What was I getting myself into?

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Things were awkward when Owen and I left Rod's place to go home. I was still irked at him about going through with that lunch, and he was irked at me about the plan for me to infiltrate the anti-magic group, even though Sam had assigned it. It didn't help matters when he said, in an "oh, by the way" casual tone, "Matilda called me this afternoon."

"Already?"

"Maybe you're right that she's recruiting me for something."

"Yeah, for a scapegoat."

"But if I know what she's doing, I'll be a lot harder to use that way. And I might find something interesting or useful."

"I'm not sure that's a great idea." We were near my place, but I felt like we needed to hash this out, and not with my roommates as an audience, so I kept walking with him toward his place.

"You've been going undercover a lot, lately," he pointed out. "How long did you spend actually inside the Collegium? You broke up with me and quit your job."

"Pretended to," I corrected.

"But the result was the same. I barely saw you for ages. We couldn't even talk on the phone. We were limited to touching through the shelves in a bookstore and borrowing other people's apartments."

That had actually been kind of sexy, in a way, but I didn't think telling him that would go over well right now. He was clearly upset, and although I didn't agree with him, I could understand why he might feel the way he did.

We walked in silence until we reached his place. When we were in his living room, he picked up the conversation as though there hadn't been any break at all. "You cut off almost all contact with the outside world. And now you're pretending to be recruited by these anti-magic people. But you don't want me to go undercover?"

"It's my job," I said, flopping down on the sofa. "Besides, I'm not being investigated as being behind illegal magical activity while already having a cloud of suspicion hanging over me. If you get yourself caught up in this, you could end up being their patsy, someone they can pin it all on so they can get away with it. They may even be the reason you're being investigated, so you'll be so desperate to find the real culprit and clear your name that you'll be open to recruitment."

"Maybe," he said grudgingly. He fiddled with a book on the shelf, not looking at me.

“Think about it. Why would they want you otherwise? What good would having a theoretical magic expert do for their cause? It doesn’t take a lot of knowledge to do a bunch of magic in public and hope people notice enough that they’d believe an announcement that magic is real. Having your name attached to their cause makes them seem like more of a threat. It’s more likely to turn away potential allies than to draw anyone in. So, if they don’t need you to pull this off, they need you for some other reason, and I’d bet it’s to make you take the blame while they shrug and say, ‘Oops, I guess the cat’s out of the bag.’ You’re already being watched. If you go anywhere near this, it could blow up all over you.”

“Unless I stop it.”

“That’s your only hope. You either bust it wide open and get absolute evidence of who’s behind the whole scheme, or you take the fall.”

“I have absolute faith that you can crack this case so that won’t happen.”

“I haven’t made that much progress on it yet.”

“You came up with the theory.”

“But I have no evidence.”

“So maybe you need someone to go undercover and get some evidence.”

I got up from the sofa to pace. It was either that or work out my frustrations by strangling him. “That’s what I’m doing. And now you’re just arguing in circles—it’s safe for you to go along with this because you trust that I’ll be able to prove who’s really behind it, but to do that I need you to go undercover because I haven’t been able to find any other evidence.”

“That sounds about right,” he said with a grin.

I stopped pacing and whirled to face him. “It’s not funny! Do you know what I went through when they arrested you last year? Do you know how hard it was to watch you put on trial, just for existing?” My eyes burned, and I could feel the tears forming. I blinked them away because crying right now would look emotionally manipulative. “I can’t go through that again. I’m pretty sure James and Gloria can’t go through that again. There are people out there just waiting for you to make one wrong move. This whole thing has ‘it’s a trap’ written all over it in giant neon letters. Don’t walk into their trap.”

“So what you’re saying is, you feel strongly about this.” He sounded so calm it was infuriating.

“I already have the wedding dress. I’ll be seriously pissed off if I don’t get to wear it because you’re in magic jail.”

“It can’t hurt to keep talking to her. They can’t arrest me for just talking to someone who hasn’t indicated that she’s up to anything

wrong. Who knows what I might find out? Besides, wouldn't it be more suspicious if I don't respond when she's been nothing but friendly?"

"I think not responding would be perfectly normal, given what you've told me about your history with her. If one of my school frenemies got in touch with me out of the blue, I'd smile and nod and lose her number. I wouldn't go to lunch with her, and I certainly wouldn't keep going to lunch with her." I realized I was shouting and in danger of getting as shrill as the woman at the rally. Forcing myself to lower my voice, I said, "Just let me handle this, okay? I'll see what these anti-magic people have to say and track back where they're getting their info."

"Okay," he said, but I didn't have to be a mind reader to know he didn't mean it. As soon as I went home, he was going to call her to accept her offer to get together again.

And that meant I needed to bust this case open, fast, before he got himself into trouble.

The next day at work, I used a fake e-mail address supplied by the department to contact Abigail Williams and express interest in learning more about her organization. The response was almost instantaneous, if terse: "Meet me at the plaza at six. Come alone."

The tricky thing about dealing with a magical immune was that I would have to be alone. There'd be no way to have a gargoyles following me or a wizard using an invisibility spell staking out the place. Anyone watching me would have to do so from afar. Still, I reported it to Sam and very pointedly didn't tell Owen because I didn't want to spur him to do something stupid and risky. He'd always had a stubborn streak, but I didn't know where this level of petty contrariness was coming from. He was under a lot of stress, which may have had something to do with it. I couldn't imagine what it must be like to have his every move so closely scrutinized and to be accused of all kinds of terrible things, just for existing. Although I understood, to some extent, I couldn't let it keep me from doing my job.

I left the office early and headed in the opposite direction from the plaza, looping around so I could approach another way. I didn't want to risk being seen leaving that magical building they'd tried to expose. That would pretty much kill my cover. When I arrived a few minutes early, Abigail and the woman from the bridal sale were already there. "So, you've seen the light," Abigail said by way of greeting as I approached.

"More like I'm curious about the light," I replied. "I'm not entirely convinced."

The bridal sale woman waved the wand of the magic detector over me and reported, "She's still registering the same way."

"Do you know what this means?" Abigail asked.

"I have no idea," I replied with a shrug. "I kind of think it means you're hitting a button on your gizmo to make it look like a serious result."

The woman tested herself and showed that the readout was in the dead center. "This is normal," she said. She tried it again with me, and the needle went all the way to the left. "This is you. It's the same with Abigail." She demonstrated on her leader.

"Yes, but what does that mean?" I asked.

"It means you're untouched by magic, and that's something of a miracle in this city, which is heavily contaminated by magic," Abigail said. "Living here and remaining pure means you're special. But there are other effects. What do you see over there?" She pointed to the MSI headquarters.

I weighed my response. It would really blow their theory if I pretended not to see it, but I wasn't sure what they'd do. I also knew I couldn't sustain that kind of charade if I didn't know what other people saw, so I'd probably be caught. Besides, my job was to infiltrate them, and that would probably go better if they thought I had whatever ability their leader had. "There's an office building that looks like it could be a castle," I said. "It's been there as long as I can remember."

They looked at each other and nodded. "You need to come with us." Abigail waved and a battered silver sedan pulled up to the curb.

"Whoa, I don't think so," I said, shaking my head. "You said we'd meet here, in public. You didn't say anything about going with you. We can talk here, but I'm not going anywhere." I crossed my arms over my chest to indicate my firm stance.

"You must come with us," Abigail insisted.

"Okay, then, I'm out," I said, turning and heading toward the subway. I hoped they'd back down and agree to talk here. Otherwise, if they called my bluff and let me go, I'd lose this avenue of investigation. What I didn't expect was to have my arms grabbed on either side. "Hey!" I protested, struggling.

"We're not going to hurt you, but you need to come," the bridal sale lady said.

She and Abigail hustled me between them toward the waiting car. I could probably have put up a fight and escaped, and I suspected there was at least one gargoyle lurking behind something nearby who would have helped. Screaming might even have helped, though in this city you never knew. But I wanted to know what they had to say, so I had to go against every instinct and let them drag me to that car and shove me into the backseat, with me putting up enough of a token protest to not look suspicious. Abigail took the seat next to me, with

the bridal sale woman in front. A man I didn't recognize was driving. If something horrible happened, I knew I'd never hear the end of it from Owen. Though I guess if something truly horrible happened, I'd never know what he had to say because I wouldn't be there to hear it. That was a cheery thought.

"So, what do y'all do when you're not having demonstrations?" I asked as the car inched its way uptown. "I mean, are you trying to get policies changed, raise awareness, or what?"

"We want people to see the truth," Abigail said. "People must remove the blinders that keep them oblivious to the true threat. You and I can see the world for what it is, no matter what they try to hide from us, but we must show the others how to see the truth."

"And what is the truth?" I asked.

"The truth is that magic exists and is being hidden from us."

I tried go back to the way I'd felt when I'd first learned about magic. So much had happened since then, it was hard to remember what it had been like to learn for the first time. I thought I recalled some skepticism on my part, in spite of the rather vivid demonstrations I'd been given. I would have been far less likely to believe under these circumstances. "Seriously?" I asked. "There's magic? You mean like Harry Potter, Gandalf, and all that? You've got to be kidding. If that's what this is about, let me out of this car, right now."

"You saw the building."

"Yeah. It was just a building. It kind of looks like a castle, but they used to have fun with architecture, and gothic-style stuff was big in the Victorian era. What's the big deal?"

The bridal sale woman turned to face us. "The rest of us don't see that building. The buildings next to it look larger and fill that spot."

"And that's proof that magic exists?"

"There is more," Abigail said, but she didn't elaborate.

If I'd been some random person off the street, this would have been far from convincing—well, the part about magic being real. I'd have been thoroughly convinced that I was dealing with some serious nutjobs. "Okay, this is getting too weird for me," I said, tugging on the door handle. We were caught in gridlock, so it wasn't as though I'd have to hurl myself out of a speeding car to escape. I just needed to step outside and walk briskly. The door didn't open. They must have had the child safety locks engaged. "Hey, what's up with this? Let me out."

"As I said, we mean you no harm," Abigail said. "But you must come with us."

"This is kidnapping. Help! Someone!" I wasn't quite as vehement as I would have been if I'd been truly serious, since I didn't really

want to escape. But I was uncomfortable enough that I was probably pretty convincing.

Abigail caught my wrist in an iron grip. “You’ll stay in the car and hear us out,” she said through clenched teeth. “Once you have heard all, it will be up to you to decide what to do.” She glared at me for a moment longer before releasing me.

I folded my arms across my chest and sat back, leaning against the seat. I almost expected them to throw a bag over my head so I wouldn’t know where they were taking me, but they made no move to do anything like that. I wondered what kind of clubhouse an anti-magic cult would have. Probably nothing nearly as interesting as a pro-magic cult.

I was rather disappointed when the car finally stopped in front of the same church where the other group had met. Did this church market to crackpot groups as a meeting location, or what? The driver kept the car running while the bridal sale lady hopped out and opened the back door for Abigail and me. She reached in and caught my wrist to pull me out of the car, and Abigail took my other arm as soon as she was out. The car took off, and they hustled me into the building and down the stairs into the basement.

We didn’t head for the larger hall where the other group had met, but rather to one of the small Sunday school classrooms, where folding chairs were arranged in a rough circle around the perimeter of the room. About half the chairs were occupied. I forced myself not to react when I saw the guy I’d thought of as the “puppy” who’d been pretending (I was sure) to investigate that bus incident. I wondered if they’d ever tested their magic detector on him.

We took seats—Abigail keeping me next to her—and sat in silence as a few more people trickled in. When it seemed the gang was all there, there were ten people. “We’re glad to have a newcomer with us tonight,” Abigail began. “Kathleen is pure of magic, like me. She can see and speak the truth.”

“Welcome, Kathleen,” the rest of the group intoned.

“We gather to share information on magic we’ve seen,” Abigail explained. “The rest of the city hasn’t noticed, or refuses to see. We’re amassing information so that one day we can prove to everyone what’s really happening. We’ll be at the forefront of revealing the truth and exposing the evil.”

“It’s evil magic?” I asked. “You’re sure about that?”

“Absolutely. The very nature of magic is evil, drawing upon dark forces, and it’s used for the good of the magic users, which is often to the detriment of everyone else. It happens to everyone, every day.” She turned from me to address the group. “Now, how have we been harmed by magic since we last met?”

People in the group glanced uncomfortably at one another until one man across the circle from me spoke up. "A crooked shopkeeper used magic to force me to buy liquor I didn't want," he said. I thought that sounded like a weak excuse. While I knew influence spells existed, and I'd even seen them in use, it was more likely that he'd overridden his own judgment and bought alcohol that he really did want and was blaming it on someone else.

A woman to my right timidly raised her hand. "I got the last packet of the good chips at the deli at lunch yesterday, and they disappeared right from my hand." That sounded a little more plausible. There might or might not have been a nonmagical explanation. But it wasn't exactly the sort of thing to make anyone worried about wizards taking over the world.

The rest of the complaints were along those lines, either someone blaming magic for making them do something they probably really wanted to do or someone feeling victimized by petty injustices. In this setting, with typical Sunday school posters on the walls—maps of Biblical lands, that creepy portrait of a blond Jesus—it reminded me of people who would go on and on in church groups asking for prayers for their neighbor's cousin's friend's hangnail, just because they wanted to be heard. It made me wonder where these people came from. Did they feel lost and invisible in this city, and being in the know about magic and having magical experiences to relate gave them something they could speak out about?

Finally, the complaint time ended, and I snapped myself back to paying attention. Abigail got up and went to the man "forced" to buy liquor. She put her hand on top of his head, closed her eyes, and said, "Ah, I sense the taint of magic on you." I forced myself to keep a straight face when all I really wanted to do was smirk. I'd never thought to try to sense magic on someone who'd been under a spell, but I seriously doubted that this guy had been whammied, unless it was for some other reason.

She went around the room, resting her hands on each person, but not saying anything, then she gestured for me to join her. "Let's see if you can feel the magic."

I started with the woman to my right. I was wearing the necklace Owen gave me that magnified the sense of magic, and I hoped it would help in this case. Much to my surprise, I did detect a slight sense of magic around her. "It's kind of tingly," I said.

Abigail nodded. "Good. Now go on."

I worked my way around the room the way she had done, calling out when I sensed magic. I must have been on track—or else she had no clue what she was talking about and was just agreeing with me—until I got to that first guy. "He's been nowhere near magic," I said,

shaking my head.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You must not be sensing accurately."

"He feels different than the others."

The man squirmed in his seat, and he couldn't meet my eyes, even when I stared at him.

"You are new at this," Abigail said dismissively.

"That's probably it," I said with a shrug.

I moved on to the guy I thought of as "puppy," and I was fairly certain there would be enough magic around him to make my hair stand on end. Much to my surprise, he was no different from anyone else. There must have been a difference between someone who used magic and someone who had magic used on him. He looked up at me, the picture of innocence, and it was enough to make me doubt my suspicions about him. Maybe I'd been wrong about seeing him at the magical nightclub. He did look like the kind of generic young white guy you saw all over the city. Or maybe he was like Marcia and Gemma, in on the secret and at the club with a magical friend.

He showed no sign of recognizing me, even though he'd spoken to me on the bus. True, I'd worn my hair a different way that day, had put on more makeup, and I'd worn a hat, but I'd have hoped there would have been at least a flicker of recognition. Either he was very good at hiding his feelings and wasn't letting anything show in this group, or I'd been so nondescript that I hadn't even registered on him.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Good," Abigail said approvingly. "You only missed one."

"I'm still not sure what this has to do with magic," I said. "It's just kind of like a vibe."

"You'll see a demonstration soon enough," she promised.

The door to the room burst open, and a man I recognized as our driver came in, dragging a woman who looked vaguely familiar. I recognized her from work, but I didn't know her name. When she glanced at me, I kept my face stony, hoping she wouldn't bust me. "A witch!" the driver cried out. "I caught her changing the streetlight."

This was getting serious if they were dragging people in for investigations. I thought we'd moved past this sort of thing centuries ago. The bridal sale lady waved the wand over the suspected witch, and the needle went all the way to the right. "Aha! A witch!" Abigail said. "What do you have to say for yourself, witch?"

I figured that whatever role I was playing, I couldn't just stand by and let this happen. "Whoa, what are you people doing?" I demanded.

"You saw what the device said. And you've felt magic, yourself," Abigail said.

"I don't know what I felt, and I'm still not convinced by your

gadget.” I turned to the driver. “What, exactly, did you see?”

“She waved her hand at the walk signal, and it changed.”

“Oh, come on!” I said. “Who hasn’t done that kind of thing when you’re impatient with waiting? I know I do it all the time—‘When I count to five, the signal will change. When I wave my hand, the signal will change.’ That doesn’t mean you made the signal change. Was it seriously out of sequence?”

“Well ...” he said, dragging the word out and not meeting my eyes.

“You want to see proof of magic?” Abigail said. “We’ll show you magic.” She turned to the woman. “Show us some magic,” she demanded.

“I don’t know what you people are talking about,” the woman said. “You’re all crazy.”

Although she was lying, I thought she was right about the crazy part. Is it gaslighting if the people you’re lying to about what they see are already crazy in a different way? I didn’t think that telling them the truth was likely to help them or change anything about the way they saw the world. It would only make them more dangerous.

If the puppy guy was who I thought he was, I’d learned what I needed to know about this group, and I’d had enough of them. I doubted burning a bridge here would kill my investigation. I stepped forward and said to the driver, “Was she hurting anyone, even if she did maybe change the signal? Not that I’m saying she did.” I looked around at the rest of the room. “If there is magic, all any of you have described is petty little stuff. Don’t you think if there really was magic, it would be a lot bigger and more important? If there were wizards, wouldn’t they be doing more than stealing potato chips?”

A couple of people nodded thoughtfully. “But ...” the driver began. “But it’s not fair,” he finally said.

“So it wouldn’t have also benefited the other people around her who also wanted to cross if she’d really changed that light?”

“It’s not fair to the other people who can’t do it,” he argued.

“And it’s not fair that some people can sing and my voice makes dogs howl,” I shot back.

While we argued, the “witch” took advantage of her captor’s distraction to extricate herself from his grasp. It took him long enough to react that she had a chance to get out the door and be well down the hallway before he thought to go after her. I hoped she’d used her powers to hide herself or to get completely away. It could get ugly if we had to send magical people to rescue her from this bunch.

To cover her escape and keep the rest of the group from forming into a mob to go after her, I stood in the doorway, put my hands on my hips, and said, “If this is what you’re all about, I don’t want any part of it,” I said. “What is this, Salem? You’re acting medieval. If

magic is real, I think it would be kind of cool, not something to be afraid of or to blame my problems on.”

The woman whose chips had allegedly been stolen stood up. “I’m with her. I’ll admit, I feel cheated that I never got my Hogwarts letter. If there’s magic, then maybe it’s something wonderful. I may not have magic, but that doesn’t mean I have to act like a Muggle.”

Abigail opened her mouth to protest, but another person in the group stood up. “Dragging in someone suspected of witchcraft was a step too far for me,” he said. “I’m out.”

More of the group took courage from their example and joined us. Soon, it was just Abigail, the bridal show lady, the guy who claimed to have been forced to buy liquor, and the puppy guy against all the rest of us. The ones who’d stood all looked to me, as though for guidance. I didn’t know what to do with them—start a new movement, the people who believe in magic but think it’s kind of okay?

For the moment, the best I could do was walk out. If they followed me, that was up to them. They did follow. When we were on the sidewalk outside the church, they clustered around me. “What do we do now?” one of them asked.

“Live your life?” I suggested.

“I mean, about magic,” she said.

“What do you think you can do about it? If it exists.”

They all looked at each other. “We can expose it,” one of the men said.

“Why?”

“So people will know,” he said.

“And then what?”

They didn’t have an answer for that, so I said, “It was nice meeting you, but I need to get going,” and hurried away.

I ignored the sound of running footsteps coming up behind me. “When should we meet again?”

“At the full moon, under the branches of an ancient oak tree,” I said, still not turning around.

“But which oak tree?”

I stopped and turned back. “I was joking. We’re not meeting. Well, you can meet, whenever you want to. But I won’t be meeting with you.”

I thought I heard a sniggering sound somewhere above me, but I waited until I’d crossed a few streets without being followed and was no longer in sight of the former cultists before I said, “And you can stop laughing whenever you want.”

Sam emerged from behind a sign above the doorway of the building ahead of me. I knew he couldn’t have used magic to conceal himself from me, but I hadn’t seen him following me. “Aw, come on,

you've gotta admit, you somehow becoming the leader of an anti-magic cult is kind of humorous," he said.

"By the time I was through with them, they weren't anti-magic anymore."

"What happened in there? I saw Arabella Richter come tearing out of there, and next thing I know, you're leadin' a parade."

I gave him a quick rundown on all that had happened. "I'm pretty sure that one of the guys in there was magical, but if he was allowed in the group, he must have somehow managed to fool their device."

"He coulda used magic to move the needle. We've got ways to fool just about anything people have come up with to identify magical folk. Their device may be good at spotting immunes, but it's useless against anyone who really has powers."

"So maybe I did recognize him. If I can just connect him to my suspect, then I'll have made the link."

"And what suspect is that?" he asked.

I groaned, torn about what to do. "I don't really want to mention it officially because this person is really well connected, and revealing I'm suspicious might get the whole thing squashed."

"And you think I'd care about connections?"

"I think you have a job to do and I don't want to put you in the position of having to hide anything. You were the one who told me not to talk about these people."

"You mean you're still thinkin' about the Mayfairs? Hoo-boy, you're right to be worried."

That wasn't reassuring.

“You mean, I’m right?” I said, my mouth going dry. It was good to be validated, but I hadn’t expected Sam to react so strongly.

“We need to talk more about this, and not in public or at the office,” Sam said.

“Then where?”

“You got a problem with heights?”

“Depends on how high.”

“What about your rooftop?”

“I could deal with that.” I paused. “Uh, you’re not going to fly me up there, are you?”

“I’m not big enough for that.”

“I don’t have the key to get to the roof.”

“I can unlock the door for you. Go home, go up the stairs, and knock three times when you get to the roof.”

I hurried home and went all the way up the stairs, passing my floor. At the final door, I knocked three times, as Sam had instructed, and it opened for me. Sam was waiting nearby, perched on an old folding chair. “Okay, we should be able to speak freely up here,” he said. “There aren’t even any pigeons right now.”

“What happened to them?” I was almost afraid to ask.

“I scared them all away. They’ll be back eventually, but we’ll have time to talk.”

“You were worried about pigeons overhearing us?”

“I was worried about wizards shapechanging into pigeons or doing spells on pigeons to use them to spy on us.”

“And I thought I was paranoid.”

“The people you’re talking about are serious. I’ve had my eye on them for years, but they’re just about untouchable. Why do you suspect them?”

“Matilda Mayfair was at the festival on the day of the big dancing spell, and she didn’t dance. She also made contact with Owen then. He claims they were never friends, but now she’s acting like they’re old friends reunited. He thought she might be trying to recruit him, but it was just lunch—except now she wants to hang out with him, and he’s surprisingly okay with that.”

Much to my relief, he didn’t say anything about me being jealous or insecure, even though I was afraid that really did have something to do with my suspicions. “What do you think she’s up to?”

“I think she’s going to expose magic and pin the public magic that blows it all wide open on Owen, and then she and her family will

profit from having a whole new market for their magical travel services. They need the money since they lost their Collegium connections.”

“Sounds like a reasonable suspicion.”

I felt light from relief to hear him say that. “You really think so?”

“Yeah. As I said, I’ve known they were fishy, but there wasn’t anything in my jurisdiction I could pin on them. This is still iffy, but if they’re goin’ after Owen in any way, that makes it our business, officially.”

“The trick is finding evidence. I think I know who the plant within the anti-magic group is. I saw him in a magical nightclub with the guy I think did the bus spell. If we could connect him to the Mayfairs, that might give us what we need.”

“Still not enough evidence to take on those people. We’ll need to catch ’em red-handed. I’m afraid Owen may be on the right track. He’s in a position to learn what she’s up to—if he can manage to do that without taking the fall.”

I sighed heavily. “Do you know how much I hate to hear you say that? I don’t want him to be right about that.”

“He’s a smart boy. He can take care of himself.”

Resting my hands on my hips, I said, “Oh, really? And how often have we had to come to his rescue?”

“We’ll just do it again. We’ll keep an eye on him, make sure we have witnesses for anything he does—or doesn’t—do, and swoop in to rescue him if he gets in trouble. Meanwhile, you see what you can get on Matilda and any links she has to those anti-magic groups.”

“I’m afraid I may have burned some bridges with that one group,” I said, wincing at the memory.

“Hang in there, kiddo. We’ve beat worse than this. We’ll do it again.”

I wished that was as reassuring as he made it sound.

I was surprised to find Owen outside my building the next morning when I headed out to go to work. We hadn’t talked at all the previous day, and I wasn’t sure if that was just because we’d both been busy or if we’d been officially not speaking. “Hey!” I said cheerfully when he handed me a cup of coffee. It was a huge relief to learn that it definitely wasn’t an official not speaking. “What’s up?”

We began walking toward the subway station. “She wants to meet me after work today—and she said to come alone. That may mean she wants to discuss something secretive.”

And there went my good mood. “That doesn’t sound fishy at all,” I remarked. “But have you considered that maybe she’s just hot for your bod and that’s why she doesn’t want your fiancée there?”

He turned a delightful shade of red. “I doubt it. I’m not really her

type.”

“Funny, I’d have thought that rich and gorgeous was her type.”

I hadn’t thought it possible for him to turn even redder, but he managed it. If he kept that up, he was going to explode. “I don’t think she’d be quite this cagey if she were going after me that way. She’d be a lot more direct. I saw how she made her conquests when we were in school.”

“She clubs them over the head and drags them back to her lair by their ankle?”

“More like grabs them by the lapels and lays a kiss on them, then they usually willingly follow her back to her lair.”

“Did it work on you?”

“She never tried it on me. That’s why I doubt that’s what’s going on here.”

“So, after work today? Where?”

“She’s going to text me a location.”

“Which you’re going to tell me as soon as you get it.” He gave me a sidelong look, and I gave him an exasperated sigh. “I’m not going to barge in like an affronted girlfriend—though that might be kind of fun. But this is technically my case. I’m the one who’s officially in security. In fact, you might think of it as you reporting to me. I’m your handler, so I need to be up on what’s happening.”

“While you’re telling me to be careful, do I need to remind you to be careful?”

“I’m not the one in danger.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t blow your operation.” That was, unless she did something I could bust her for.

We reached the subway station, where we could no longer have that kind of conversation without being overheard. I hated that we’d left it that way. I didn’t think it counted as an actual fight, but there were some hard feelings. I was sure he thought I didn’t trust him, and I felt like he was disregarding my concerns. I was pretty sure I knew what was going on with him. He wanted to prove himself, to show the magical world that he really was one of the good guys. Never mind that he’d done that already over and over again. I wasn’t sure what it would take, but my fear was that no matter how this case came out, it wouldn’t be what he needed to seal his reputation for good, and it showed every sign of being a big risk that might tarnish him further. I had to remind myself that even Sam thought Owen was our best bet.

Much to my relief, Owen did text me the time and place of his meeting with Matilda, and while I wasn’t planning to barge in, I was going to be there, and I’d need backup. I found Sam at his usual spot on the front awning and said, “They’re on for after work today.”

“The plot thickens. Step into my office.” He waved a wing, and a translucent bubble formed around us. “That’ll hide us from prying eyes and ears. You’re free to talk here.”

I gave him the details on the meeting, then said, “I want eyes on him there, someone who could testify about what he really says or does. And I intend to tail her afterward to see what she does and who she talks to. It might be nice to have at least one gargoyle along, if you’ve got someone you trust.”

“How about me?”

“Yeah, I think you’ll do,” I said with a grin. “Do we have any nonmagical ways of wiring Owen for sound? I’d bet she’ll have prepared to avoid magical eavesdropping.”

“I can set him up. Have you talked to the boss about this?”

“I thought I ought to go through the chain of command.”

“I’ll read him in. I think we’re pretty safe in assuming he won’t be swayed by their influence, and we know he can keep it quiet.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s likely. Okay, I guess that’s about all we can do for now, unless you can manage to get rid of all the cabs when she leaves the restaurant so it’ll be easier for me to follow her.”

“That’s actually a pretty good thought. The ‘follow that cab’ routine doesn’t work as well in reality as it does in the movies, not if you don’t want to be noticed. But if she does get in a cab, I’ll try to follow.”

My preparation for the operation was to run up to the sidewalk shops in Chinatown to pick up supplies for possibly tailing Matilda—a selection of scarves, sunglasses, and hats that I stuffed into a generic-looking tote bag. I figured it was probably safest not to count on my generic appearance rendering me essentially invisible.

Before the appropriate time, I took my position outside the bar where Owen and Matilda were meeting for drinks. He got there first and took a table by the window, which made it easier to watch. The fact that he’d followed the plan that much was a relief. The time of the meeting arrived and passed, and there was no sign of her. Was she late, or had she spotted the surveillance and bailed? My fingers twitched near my phone as I fought the urge to call Owen and tell him it was off. Was this the time they were going to make something magical happen and frame him? If it was, it was a bad plan, since an odd event at a bar was hardly the sort of thing that would get a lot of attention. That thought kept me from aborting the operation.

She finally arrived about ten minutes after the arranged time, emerging from a cab and sashaying into the bar as though she had all the time in the world. Owen stood to greet her, and I tried not to grit my teeth when she did that air kiss thing, only I got the impression that she made actual contact, and she certainly seemed to linger. She

summoned a waiter with an elegant wave, and she leaned forward across the table to talk to Owen. I knew it was probably because they were in a noisy environment and it was necessary for him to hear her, but it looked a lot like she was trying to create a sense of intimacy, especially when she touched his hand whenever she seemed to be emphasizing something she said. My hands hurt, and I realized that I was clenching my fists so hard that my fingernails were digging into my palms. I forced myself to relax and uncurl my fingers. I trusted him, and I knew he wasn't interested in her romantically. Everything would be okay. I hoped.

They talked for a long time, and I wished I had a feed from Owen's wire, but he was just recording, not transmitting. The security tech team thought that was safer and less likely to be detected or disrupted. He looked serious, but he so often did, so that didn't mean anything. He never showed any sign that he'd heard something particularly shocking. He didn't act angry or surprised. He just nodded as she spoke. She gave every impression of this being a casual get-together. In fact, if I hadn't known better and had been an impartial observer, I probably would have assumed that this was a first date. She was going overboard on being witty and charming, tossing her hair over her shoulder, smiling, and occasionally laughing. He smiled in response to her laughs.

She ordered a second round of drinks, and the vibe got even friendlier, like they'd finished discussing whatever business there was and were just hanging out. By this time, my legs and back hurt from standing, and I'd run out of things I could do to make myself look inconspicuous. I'd pretended to be on a phone call, had leaned against a wall and pretended to read the newspaper. I'd checked my watch impatiently a few times, like I was waiting for someone who was running late. I finally faked another phone call, to which I responded in exasperation, as though the person I'd been waiting for had bailed on me. I was just returning my phone to my purse and preparing to move on when they finally paid the tab and got up to leave.

They came out of the bar together, and she looked up and down the street for a cab. Thanks to Sam's intervention, there weren't any. She and Owen did that air kiss thing again, making my blood boil, and then they turned and walked in opposite directions.

I walked in the same direction as Matilda, staying on the opposite side of the street at first, until she turned. Then I hurried across the street and followed her, keeping far enough back that she wouldn't feel like she was being tailed, but close enough to keep an eye on her.

I didn't know how long I'd be able to stay with her. Sam hadn't been able to block every cab in the city, so she was bound to eventually run into one, but she was close to her neighborhood, which

I hoped meant she'd just hoof it home, or wherever else she was going. I wore a hat, sunglasses, and had a brightly colored scarf draped across my shoulders. She turned to glance behind her briefly, and as soon as she turned back around, I quickly pulled off the hat and scarf and put on a different hat and scarf.

Much to my relief, she didn't go straight home. She went to a park and sat down on a bench. That was going to make keeping an eye on her without being conspicuous a little more challenging. I walked behind her, got behind some trees, took off my jacket, draped another scarf around my shoulders, and changed hats before getting on the sidewalk and approaching as though I was coming from the opposite direction. I was still trying to decide whether I could get away with sitting down on her bench when a man walked past me and took a seat on the opposite end of the bench where she sat. That settled the matter. I wandered casually over to the adjacent bench, separated from them by a spindly tree, and sat with a heavy sigh, as though I'd been walking all day and my feet were killing me. I took my newspaper out of my bag and pretended to work the crossword puzzle.

"How did it go?" he asked. He'd turned to face her, so I couldn't see his face. I should have tried to get a better look before I sat down, but I'd been afraid to look like I was paying any attention to them.

"Can we talk freely?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I've taken care of that," he replied. I guessed that meant he'd created a privacy bubble like the one Sam had formed when we were talking in front of the office building. Too bad it didn't work on someone like me, I thought, trying not to grin smugly.

"I think we've got him," she said. "He doesn't seem to suspect a thing, poor sap. Though he did spend an annoying amount of time talking about his upcoming wedding."

Ha! I thought.

"How much did you get out of him?"

"Not too much, other than the wedding stuff. He didn't want to talk about work."

"Is that because he doesn't trust you?"

"I think he's feeling discouraged, and he doesn't want to talk about that. Which puts him where we want him."

"You're sure you trust him?"

She laughed. "Him? I don't think he has it in him to be deceptive. He's just so very earnest. It's kind of adorable. He wants to be a good boy and prove himself."

"Are you sure that's not what he's doing, but for the other side?" His voice sounded so familiar, it was frustrating. I concentrated on his voice, trying to think of where I'd heard it before.

“Possibly. But it doesn’t matter. The more involved he gets, the better it is for us.”

“I’m assuming you’ve got a plan for our next demonstration.”

“I have something in the works. At least, I just got a brilliant idea.”

“Well, it better happen soon because I think the idiots are losing interest. We lost most of the group yesterday because they were easily talked out of it.” That’s where I knew him! He was the guy I’d dubbed “puppy” on the bus, who’d been part of the anti-magic group. I still couldn’t see his face, but I was pretty sure the voice matched. Or was that wishful thinking, since I hoped he’d be the key that linked Matilda to the anti-magic/magic exposure efforts? But would he associate me with Owen? If he knew that the person who’d splintered his group was the person marrying Owen, then both Owen’s and my operations were shot. But he didn’t say anything more.

“It wouldn’t hurt to let all our friends languish,” she said. “If they aren’t reporting things in a crackpot frenzy, then our big demonstration will have more impact.”

“I don’t know, I think we need to keep them interested or we might lose them.”

“But no one takes them seriously. They’ve served their purpose in getting some attention. I do want to keep that reporter on the hook, though. I think by now she’s seriously questioning.”

“Maybe we should set up a few less-public experiences just for her—no news releases or tips, just follow her in her daily life and make things happen. By the time we’re done with her, she’ll jump at the explanation the big event offers.”

“Oh, that’s good. Yes, do that. And I may see about a few events where our new friend is present, so he’ll remain under suspicion.”

I figured I’d heard enough. If they hadn’t spotted me and had that entire conversation for my benefit, I had a good idea what they had planned. No useful evidence, though. Even if I’d had a recording of the entire conversation, it would have done me no good. They hadn’t even needed the magical shield to keep anyone from eavesdropping. Nothing they’d said sounded all that suspicious.

I pretended to finish my crossword, put my newspaper in my bag, put on a pair of sunglasses, and stood. As I walked past their bench, I glanced in their general direction, as though I was looking at something behind them. It was just enough for me to tell that he was the guy I thought he was. Fortunately, they were still too busy talking to look at me. At least, they gave no sign of recognizing me.

Once I was away from the park, I caught the subway and headed back to my part of town, going straight to Owen’s place. He was already home, so as soon as I got inside, I said, “She’s definitely the one.”

At the same time, he said, "I think we're on the wrong track."

I recoiled. "Huh? What?"

"I don't think she's up to anything. I think she's just feeling a bit down, with all her family's gone through, and she reached out to someone who might understand."

I tried to keep any animosity or bitterness out of my voice when I spoke, because I had a feeling it wouldn't go over very well. "That's funny, because when I followed her after your meeting, she got together with a guy who's part of one of those anti-magic groups, and they talked about what their next steps would be. They're definitely using you, counting on you being earnest and wanting to prove yourself."

He shook his head forcefully. "No, I don't believe it."

"That's what I heard."

"All we talked about was what's going on in our lives. She wanted to hear all about our wedding and what's going on at work."

"The work was what she wanted to know about. She said she was bored about the wedding. They're planning their big final push, some showy thing that will make it obvious that magic is real, and then they're going public. They don't need you to actually do anything." I collapsed onto the sofa. "They also talked about stopping the smaller demonstrations so the big one will be taken more seriously, except for specific people they're targeting, like Carmen, the reporter. I think we need to bring her in on this. If she knows the truth, maybe she won't fall for what they're planning."

"It'll be tough to get clearance for that unless she figures it out for herself and starts asking questions. That's even over Merlin's head. The Council has to agree."

"But what if the Council's compromised?"

"You think someone that high is in on it?"

"I think these people are good at buying what they want."

He joined me on the sofa. "Are you sure you really heard all that? Or were they talking vaguely and you interpreted it that way because of what you wanted to hear or expected to hear?"

"Are you doubting me?" My voice went a little more shrill than I liked, but it was hard to stay calm when I felt like my worst paranoid fears were playing out.

"No! I just think you've been working very hard on all this, and I know you want to protect me, so you're jumping at any suspicion. But I think that's blinding you to other possibilities. Are you sure you're not just jealous of Matilda?"

Up to that point, I could almost believe what I was hearing. It had all been plausible, the kind of thing I might expect him to say, based on what he'd heard. But that was a step too far. It was beyond

anything I could imagine Owen Palmer saying. Instead of being angry, I became concerned. "Okay, who are you and what did you do with Owen Palmer?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You just accused me of mishearing an entire conversation because I was jealous about you reuniting with someone you didn't even like when you were in school. That's not like you."

"Well, you did sound kind of jealous."

"Because I accurately reported what I heard our two top suspects discussing in a clandestine meeting?" I reached over and put a hand on his forehead. "Seriously, are you feeling okay?"

What I felt wasn't a fever. I felt traces of magic, as though someone had done a spell on him. It was just like what I'd felt from the people at the meeting, only much stronger.

"I'm fine. Why?" he said, apparently not noticing my reaction.

"You're just being a bit weird, is all. Oops, I forgot to check in with Sam after tailing Matilda. Hang on a sec." I got up and went into the hall, where I called Sam.

"So, what'd you get? I couldn't hear a thing," he said when he answered.

"A lot, but that's not my real problem right now. Get Rod and get over to Owen's place."

"Is something wrong?"

"That's what I need you guys to tell me. Do you have anything that detects whether someone's been whammied?"

"Ohhhh," he said, getting it. "Yeah, we'll be right over."

Although Owen had acted out of character, I didn't think he would do anything as unusual as hurting me, but I was still wary about being alone with him if he was compromised. Depending on the spell he was under, it was even possible that our previous conversation might have been relayed to our enemies. I kept my distance, as casually as I could, when I returned to the living room. "Sam read me the riot act for forgetting to check in," I said with a laugh that sounded way too nervous. "He was worried after he lost me when I went into the subway."

He leaned back on the sofa, stretching his legs out in front of him. "I guess you'll have to get used to following procedure now that you're doing this for real instead of just as a hobby." Even knowing that this might not have really been Owen talking, that stung.

"Yeah, I guess I was used to going rogue," I said.

I was surprised by how soon the doorbell rang. Rod must have magically teleported over because there was no other way he could have arrived so quickly unless he'd already been lurking outside.

I started to rush for the door, but barely checked myself when

Owen got up and went to the intercom, muttering, "I wonder who that is."

"Hey!" Rod's voice came over the intercom. "I thought I'd pop by so we could talk about the bachelor party."

"Oh, okay, I guess," Owen said and buzzed him up.

Rod was still a bit out of breath when Owen opened the front door for him, so either he'd sprinted or he'd used up a lot of energy to get here. He clapped Owen on the shoulder in greeting, but kept a firm grip for longer than was normal.

A soft glow began to spread around Owen, and it gradually solidified into a shining, multicolored web. "You're right," Rod said to me, "he's covered in spells."

“Spells? What are you talking about?” Owen said.

Rod gestured to the shining web around him. “Someone’s whammied you but good.” He groaned. “And I bet it started right under my nose.”

“Are we safe talking about it?” I asked.

“I think his wards will keep this private,” Rod said.

“Yeah, but what about him? I think it’s safe to say he’s compromised.”

“But he won’t get anything out past the wards, and we’re not letting him leave until we’ve got this cleaned up.”

I thought for a second that Owen would attack Rod. He raised his hand, and the spell Rod had used to make the magic visible made Owen’s hand flash with a bright white light. I moved in between him and Rod, hoping that either he would hesitate to attack me, in spite of the whammy, or my immunity would save me. But then Owen closed his eyes, clenched his jaw, and made an obvious effort to get himself under control. “Can you do something about it?” he asked, his voice strained.

“Sam’s on his way over, and he may be able to help,” Rod said.

“These are pretty well woven, so it could be tricky.”

“Would it help if I were unconscious, so I’m not fighting you?” Owen asked.

“Maybe, but I don’t think I can get past all this to knock you out safely.”

“I was thinking more in terms of a potion. Katie, the blue bottle in the liquor cabinet.”

I followed his instruction and found the bottle. “You keep a knockout potion in your liquor cabinet?” I asked as I brought it to where Owen had sat on the sofa.

“Doesn’t everyone?” Rod quipped. “Liquor is basically a knockout potion. It just varies on how much it takes and how quickly it kicks in.”

“You never know when a knockout potion will come in handy,” Owen said. “It takes forever to brew, so I do it in batches. Three drops should do it. There should be some soda in the refrigerator that will mask the taste a little bit.”

It was somewhat reassuring that it apparently had a bad enough taste that it had to be masked. That meant no one could easily sneak it on anyone. I found the soda, poured a glass, and uncapped the blue bottle. The smell was horrible and intense enough that I thought it

might knock someone out without them having to drink it. I was getting a bit woozy just from smelling it. I added three drops to the soda and hurried to recap the bottle before I passed out. I brought it back to the living room and handed it to Owen. "Here you go."

"You may have to make me drink it," he said. His arm was rigid, and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he tried to force the glass to his lips. His hand moved as though to throw the glass, but Rod intercepted it.

"Okay, that's making things interesting," Rod said. He held the glass against Owen's lips. "Open wide." Owen instantly closed his mouth, then sweat dripped down his face as he slowly forced his mouth open. Rod quickly poured the drink into Owen's mouth. A little trickled out the corners of his mouth, but he managed to swallow most of it. His eyelids fluttered, then he slumped to the side. Rod caught him and lowered him until his head rested on the arm of the sofa. "That should make this easier," he said.

For him, maybe, and for Owen, but looking at him lying there, the web of spells still surrounding him, was hard on me. I felt terrible for my bursts of jealousy about the way he'd been acting. It hadn't been his fault at all. On the other hand, would I have noticed that something was wrong sooner if I hadn't dismissed my own qualms as nothing more than jealousy? I'd known they were doing something to target Owen, and it hadn't occurred to me to make sure he was truly okay.

A rapping on the front window shook me out of my self-recrimination, and I hurried over to open it for Sam. "Sorry it took me so long. I was still uptown," he said as he hopped inside. "Too bad I can't do that fancy teleport thing you guys do."

"Yeah, well maybe I shouldn't have done it because I may be too drained to handle this properly," Rod said. Now that Owen was out and Rod didn't have to play it cool in front of his friend, he looked really concerned. "They've got him all tangled up. I don't know how she could have done it while I was right there, watching. I didn't notice any magic."

"When she met with her contact, they used some kind of bubble spell," I said. "Maybe they did that, but blocking you from sensing the magic rather than blocking the sound."

"And because I could see them, I assumed everything was aboveboard," Rod said, shaking his head. "But the fact remains that we'll have to be careful untangling all this."

"Do these spells explain why he was so determined to meet with her again, and why he wouldn't listen to me?" I asked.

"Probably," Rod replied, and I tried not to sigh out loud in relief. "They were definitely making him compliant. There might also be a

surveillance component here.” He squinted at the web of spells. “They wouldn’t have been able to monitor him live from warded spaces like his house or office, but they might have been able to download information when they were around him. I still don’t see how I could have missed this.”

“A lot of us missed it,” Sam said. “How did you notice it, Katie?”

“He just seemed weird, not like himself. He wouldn’t listen to my suspicions about Matilda, not even when I told him what I overheard. I checked him for fever, and I felt something. One thing Abigail Williams did when she kidnapped me for that cult meeting was teach me to detect when magic had been used on someone, and that’s what this felt like.”

“Good work,” Sam said.

“At least something worthwhile came out of that freaky cult meeting.”

“Okay, let’s start dismantling this,” Rod said, rubbing his hands together. He picked up one of the shining strands and gently unwound it, like he was picking out stitches. “That’s the protective one that holds the rest together. Good thing he was out, or he’d have fought me. Next we’d better go after the surveillance.”

“I’ve got a counterspell for that,” Sam said. He perched on the sofa arm near Owen’s head, raised his wings as though to wrap Owen up in them, gave them one good flap, then stepped back. Another of the shining threads disappeared, and the web looked a lot less complex.

“Okay, okay,” Rod muttered to himself. “That’s good. Which one next?”

“That one on top, the red one, should be easy to get,” Sam said, pointing.

Rod reached out to touch it, but jerked his hand back. “Ow! It’s got a protective spell on it.”

“Maybe I could try,” I said. “Does it take magic to undo?”

“It’s hard to say. This visualization is magic, but that particular thread seems to be energy,” Rod said. “Let’s see what happens.”

I moved closer and grabbed for what looked like the end of the red thread. I couldn’t feel anything to know if I had it, but when I moved my hand, the red thread moved. It was wound around several of the other threads, and I gently worked it through the tangle, like I was unsnarling a hank of yarn. When I’d separated it from the other spells, I held the red thread in my hands and asked, “Now what?”

“Throw it in the air,” Sam instructed. I did so, and he hit it with a blast that made it disintegrate. “Good work, doll. It should be easier from here.”

Working together, Sam and Rod managed to either physically remove or do counterspells on the remaining spells. A couple of times,

Owen stirred, as though what they were doing was painful to him, even when he was unconscious. "Yeah, he'd have been forced to fight us on that one," Sam muttered when that happened.

"You're not hurting him, are you?" I asked. "I mean, there's no chance that any of these are in tight enough to do actual harm, is there?"

"I don't think so," Rod said.

"We'd have noticed by now if they were," Sam added. That wasn't reassuring.

Finally, there was no sign of spells left. Rod and Sam did a few more bits of magic, trying to uncover any other spells they might have missed. "I think that's it," Rod said. "But we'll need to figure out what to do now. They'll notice that all their spells are gone next time Matilda sees him, so they'll know we're on to them."

"Should she see him again?" I asked. "He was only insisting on that because of the spells."

"They'll also know we're on to them if he doesn't see her again," Sam said.

"Unless we move fast. As busy as he is, it can be hard to schedule the next get-together. There's the bachelor party this weekend, and we're on the final stretch to the wedding. We can buy time that way," I said. "I'd just as soon he stayed well away from her. I doubt he'd learn anything useful, and he might get into huge trouble." Now that we knew what she'd done to him, I figured I had every right to suggest that he avoid her, and insecurity had nothing to do with it.

"Him being busy might be a clue that the whammy's gone," Sam pointed out. "Some of those spells might have made him drop everything to do her bidding."

"I think we'd have known something was up if he'd skipped his own bachelor party or wedding," I said. "I doubt she'd take it that far." But I was really glad we'd eliminated the surveillance spell before the wedding.

"What to do next is a decision for him to make," Rod said, "and he can make it for himself now that he can think straight again. Well, when he's conscious."

"How long's he going to be out?" I asked. He looked peaceful sleeping now, and I was sure he was exhausted, but I was a little worried by the fact that he hadn't stirred since we'd cleared the spells. "Is there some way to undo the sleeping potion?"

"True Love's Kiss is fairly traditional," Rod said.

"Oh, like in *Sleeping Beauty*?" I asked, sitting on the edge of the sofa next to Owen. "I guess I could try it." I took his hand in mine and leaned forward.

"Sorry, I was just joking," Rod said. "As far as I know, True Love's

Kiss doesn't do anything magical. 'True Love' is hard to quantify well enough to use it as a factor in magic. It's all in the eye of the beholder."

I straightened and turned to glare at him. "It worked when we were stuck in the elven realm. That was what broke the spell that made us forget who we were. But Owen said something about that having to do with cognitive dissonance and the brain not being able to hold contradictory truths simultaneously, or something like that."

"Well, it doesn't counteract a potion, so we might as well get some dinner. He'll wake up hungry."

Sam hopped up onto the table in front of the window. "I'd better go report to the boss. He may have something to say about our next steps."

When Sam was gone, Rod said, "Normally, I'd be tempted to just zap us some dinner, but I don't have the magic left in me. We'll have to order takeout. I think I could inhale an entire pizza by myself. You?"

"Sounds good," I said. I was hungry, but I didn't really have much appetite. While Rod called the neighborhood pizza place, I picked up Owen's limp hand and held it. I still felt some magical residue around him, but I suspected that had something to do with the magic used to remove the magic. It wasn't at all like what I'd felt before. I couldn't hold back a smile at the thought that Abigail had actually taught me something useful. While I'd known for a while how to detect the use of magic around me, I'd never thought to try to sense magic that had been used on a person. Little did Abigail know, but that talent wasn't restricted to magical immunes. Anyone could feel magic if they knew what they were looking for. Most people dismissed that feeling as merely a shiver up the spine or a funny vibe. Anyone in that group could have learned to tell whether or not magic was being used on them.

I brushed a strand of dark hair off Owen's forehead. His skin was a little clammy, probably because of all the sweating he'd done when they were working on him. I imagined that knocking him out had been a good call, or we might have had something that looked like The Exorcist.

His eyelids fluttered, and he stirred. His hand tightened around mine, and I said, "Owen?"

He opened his eyes and looked up at me blearily. "I guess I came out okay, huh?"

"It was a close one," Rod said, coming back over to us. "And you're just in time for dinner. The pizza will be here soon. You'd better drink some water. I'll go get you a glass."

While Rod headed to the kitchen, Owen struggled to sit up, then

lay back wearily. "Yeah, that can wait. How bad was it?"

"I don't know how many spells were on you, but it was a lot."

He winced. "And I said some awful things to you. I'm so sorry. You know I didn't mean them."

"Actually, that was one of the clues that something was wrong. I didn't think you'd suddenly gone Mr. Hyde on me. I mean, we've disagreed about things before, but you're never nasty or personal about it."

"I just don't know how I didn't notice she was enchanting me."

"Don't feel too bad," Rod said, returning with a glass of water. "She did at least some of it right under my nose." He helped Owen sit up so he could drink, and after downing half the glass, Owen was strong enough to sit up on his own. I got up so he could swing his legs around and sit normally on the sofa.

"I suspect the first spell had something to do with making me not notice the rest," he said, frowning. "I got to the restaurant late, and there was already a water glass on the table. She might have put a potion in it to make me less aware. It wouldn't have taken much."

"Now that I think about it, it was weird how much you let her touch you," Rod said, nodding in thought. "You don't normally go in for someone who keeps tapping on your hand while they talk."

"I hate that," Owen said. "She did that to me?"

"Yeah, like she wanted to make sure she kept your attention. And I can't believe I didn't notice it at all. We should have checked you for enchantments after that meeting. Katie, maybe you'd better talk to Sam about making that a policy. If you meet with an informant or anyone we don't entirely trust, you get scanned for spells. Heck, maybe we should just scan employees on the regular."

"We have a lot of employees who use spells on themselves on an ongoing basis," I reminded him. He was one of them.

"Well, we could scan people for spells done by other people."

"I don't think it'll come up very often," Owen said after taking another sip of water. "Doing magic like that violates a number of codes."

"Yeah, and so does doing magic in public, which is what their whole scheme is about," I said. I gasped. "But that gives us something we've got on her, doesn't it? Her doing those spells on Owen means she broke the rules, and we can get her for that, like using tax evasion to get Al Capone. We do have some kind of evidence, don't we?"

"We could get her for that, I guess," Rod said. "But I don't think it'll stop the big-picture plans. It'll just warn them that we know." Turning to Owen, he said, "Speaking of which, we were going to leave this up to you. How do you want to deal with Matilda? If you go near her, she'll know the spells have been undone, which means she'll

know we're on to her. But if you avoid her, she may also realize we figured it out."

"I think I could create an aura that mimics the sense of the spells," Owen said.

"Or you could just stay away from her," I chimed in. "You've got good excuses. She knows your bachelor party is this weekend, so she'll know you're busy, and she has to know that if she used magic to compel you to skip something like that to meet with her, we'd know something was up."

"Good point," Owen said. "We can worry about that later."

"And since we know you're not under any spells, you have zero excuses for anything that happens at your bachelor party," I teased.

"We're going to a baseball game. What kind of trouble can I get into?" Owen asked.

"You're going to a baseball game with me," Rod said with a wicked grin.

The way I figured, this meant I had maybe four days to bust Matilda before I had to worry about Owen walking into the lion's den. I was afraid I'd exhausted most of my options, and I still didn't have enough proof to go on. There was one last thing I could try, and I knew no one magical would like it, but I figured they wouldn't know until I'd already done it and either succeeded or failed.

The next morning, I called the TV station, crossing my fingers in hopes that Carmen would be there. I thought it was a good omen when she was. "Hi, it's Kathleen, from all those crazy events," I said. Fortunately, she didn't hang up immediately.

"Yeah?" she said, her voice sounding guarded.

"There's something I need to show you that I think you'll find interesting. It's not a story, just something that might make everything make more sense."

"Like what?"

"I really can't tell you. I have to show you. In person."

"Where?"

"Central Park. Let's say the Alice statue."

I could sense her relief that I wasn't asking her to meet me in some hidden alley. That was a public, busy spot, so it wasn't likely that I was going to conk her over the head and haul her off to my secret lair. "Okay, how about six this evening? I'll have to have today's story done by then."

"Six it is. I'll see you then. And don't worry, it's not bad. You may even like it."

I had to leave work a little early to be sure of making it there before she arrived. I was worried that Owen would suggest we get dinner after work, but he didn't say anything, and if he thought it was

weird that I didn't suggest it, that also went without comment. Things were okay between us after the spells were undone. At least, I thought so. I hoped so, considering we were getting married in a little more than a week. Of course, whether we were okay after today would depend on how he took what I was about to do.

It was a pleasant spring evening, and the park was full when I arrived, lots of other people apparently sneaking out of work early to enjoy some time outdoors. I worried that might work against me, since the magical beings tended to be shy about crowds.

Carmen was already there when I reached the statue. She wasn't quite in full incognito mode, but she had her hair in a ponytail and wore glasses, so she didn't look like her on-air self. "I'm glad you came," I said as I approached her.

"You had me intrigued," she said with a shrug. "So, what did you want to show me?"

"Come with me," I said and began walking, heading toward the boathouse and the path that skirted the lake. All the while, I kept an eye out for any signs of magic. Wouldn't you know, it was a quiet night for magical creatures. If I'd been hoping to keep the secret from Carmen, the place would have been swarming with gnomes and sprites, but now that I wanted her to see them, they'd become strangely shy. Did they know what I'd planned, somehow? I hadn't told a soul, so unless they could read my mind, they couldn't possibly have known.

"Are we going anywhere in particular?" Carmen asked as we walked across Bethesda Terrace.

"I'm looking for something," I said. "We're bound to run across it sooner or later."

As we followed the path around the lake, I spotted a park ranger ahead of us, and it was one of the sprites—as the male fairies preferred to be called. In fact, I thought it might have been one of Trix's exes. I touched her arm and indicated the ranger. "Notice anything unusual about him?" I asked. "Anything at all? And don't hesitate to tell me something because you think it's too weird."

She frowned, took a breath as though to speak, then shook her head. "Nope."

"So you don't see that he has wings, like he's an overgrown fairy?"

Her head snapped around toward me so quickly that I suspected she'd need to see a chiropractor soon. "What? You see them, too?"

"Yeah, I see them."

"And they look real. Not like a costume. Why would he be wearing a costume at work in the park at this time of year?" Her voice had gone a little shrill. I took her arm and guided her down the path, passing the ranger, who nodded politely, and around a bend where he

was no longer in sight. Ahead of me, I saw a gnome digging at the base of a tree. I waited to see Carmen's reaction. She definitely reacted. I could tell she saw him. Her eyes focused on him, and she turned her head to keep her eyes on him as we passed, but she didn't say anything.

"Don't tell me you didn't see the gnome back there," I said.

She came to a dead stop and dug in, refusing to budge. "Okay, just what the hell is going on here?"

"I haven't been entirely honest with you," I said. "All those weird things that have happened? They're magic. Magic's real. And you're apparently immune to it. That means it doesn't work on you, and the magic used to hide magic from normal people doesn't work on you. That's why you see wings that no one else sees, why you see a garden gnome at work. It's why you didn't have the urge to dance when everyone else at that festival broke out into a dance routine."

"Have you been doing all this to me?" she asked, her eyes going wide.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not behind it. I'm a magical immune, too, and I work for a magical company. There is someone out there trying to expose magic. They're the ones who've been doing these things, and I'm pretty sure they're the ones who've been sending you news releases. I bet they saw you reacting to something you shouldn't have seen, so they're targeting you."

"And that brawl at the bridal sale?"

"A real magical fight, though I don't know if that one was staged or just strong feelings about discount designer gowns."

"Why shouldn't magic be exposed? If it's real. I'm not saying I'm convinced yet."

"I can't do magic to show you because, as I said, I'm immune—so nonmagical that magic doesn't work on me. Magic's a big secret because it would probably seriously mess up the world if everyone knew about it. There are a lot of rules about keeping it secret, and that generally keeps magical people from going overboard. If there are harsh penalties for being seen using magic, it's harder for them to take over the world. Without the rules, it's no-holds-barred. And that keeps ordinary people from being able to get magic users to do things for them."

"So you're saying this is for our own good?"

"Yeah, and from what I can tell, it makes sense. Can you imagine how it would reshape society if everyone knew about magic?"

"If it's such a secret, why are you telling me?"

"I'm telling you in part because I've been where you are, seeing things that don't make sense and questioning my grasp on reality. I know how it feels to learn the truth. And in part because there are

people in the magical world who are tired of hiding—for the reasons that we need to keep magic a secret. They want to use it to profit, maybe to control people. Who knows, maybe to take over the world. Since they're trying to work through you, our best chance of stopping it is to work with you. Really, I shouldn't be telling you anything. I could get into serious trouble if anyone I work with found out that I'd clued you in. But I think you could really help me."

"Help how?"

"They're planning something big, the ultimate revelation about magic in a place and situation where it can't be denied. I suspect they'll make sure you're there, so I need you to let me know when you get a tip or a news release that seems at all fishy. And I need you not to do that story."

"Do you know what being the one to break the news that magic is real could do for my career?"

"If you just happen to be there when something happens? Probably not much. It wouldn't reflect on you, and I suspect there would be a lot of people doubting you. Even if you investigated it and found evidence, you might not be believed. You'd be accused of faking it. You'd also have a hard time being sure you were proving it because, as I said, the magic used to hide magic doesn't work on you. Most people don't see what you see. What you might think you're exposing could be invisible to the rest of the world."

She shook her head. "This is nuts."

"Is it? Or does it make things make so much more sense now?"

"So, the gargoyles that seem to move, that's magic?"

"A lot of them are my friends. They tend to work as security guards. Nice guys, though not all of them are very bright."

"What's your role in all this?"

"I work for a magical company. I guess you could call it the producer of software for the magical world. They come out with all the spells magical people need to use their power. And since they're the major player in the magical world, they have a lot to do with policing the use of magic. There is a magical government, of sorts, that runs things otherwise, but we handle a lot of it. What you and I are is very rare, and magical people need our help. If you've got magical powers, magic works on you, so other magical people can use illusion to hide things from you. We see what's really there, no matter what. We can't be fooled."

"This is a lot to think about."

"I know. But once you come to terms with it, it feels pretty good. You can't tell anyone—not that they'll believe you. I put a lot on the line to clue you in."

"I'm not promising anything. What are you gonna do if I tell?"

“There’s not much I can do to you, not directly. But we do have ways of undermining your credibility. I wouldn’t suggest trying to go public with this. It’s not a threat. It’s just what we have to do. They’ve been covering magic up for more than a thousand years. They’re pretty good at it by now.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding. “What do you need from me?”

“Like I said, let me know what’s going on if you hear anything, and don’t do the story. I don’t suppose you’ve had any news releases about this weekend from the usual anonymous source?”

“Actually, I’d just got one before I left today.”

“And?”

“It was even more vague than normal, something about how the big demonstration would be Saturday, and the world would see what’s going on.”

My pulse quickened, and I had to resist the urge to grab her arm in my excitement. “Did it say when or where on Saturday?”

“No, just that details would be coming later. I don’t work this Saturday, though.”

“Is there a way you could still get any information that comes in on Saturday?”

“I can check with the assignment editor.”

“Please do that.” I wrote my cell number on the back of my business card—one of the ones for general use that doesn’t mention magic. “This is very important. And when it’s all over, maybe I can get you a little more clued in about magic.”

Only when we’d parted ways did I realize she hadn’t actually promised anything about not doing the story. I just had to trust her and hope that I could stop whatever public demonstration of magic there was going to be before it became news.

I hurried back to my place and miraculously caught all my roommates at home. "It looks like the big 'magic is real' demonstration is set for Saturday," I told them as soon as I was through the front door. They all looked up at me, baffled. "The thing the bad guys are up to, the ones who want to expose magic," I explained.

"Where? What are they doing?" Nita asked, sitting up straighter from her spot on the sofa, her eyes flashing with excitement.

"I don't know," I had to admit. "We need to figure out what they might hit so we'll know where and exactly when. Any ideas?" I dragged a dining chair into the living room so I could join the others. Our living room wasn't really equipped for all of us to be in there at once.

"It would have to be something people are sure to see, something that would be on TV," Gemma said. "Otherwise, the news wouldn't be guaranteed to get out."

"Can you think of anything?" I asked. "You're the walking Time Out New York. What events would be great for exposing magic that would likely be on TV?"

Gemma wrinkled her forehead in thought. "Fashion Week would be great, but that's in the fall."

"No, people would think magic was just part of the show," Marcia said. "Don't they do all kinds of fancy lighting and special effects? If you want to show off magic, it would have to be something relatively staid and boring, so you'd notice the magic and it would be impossible to explain away. I have an idea: There's an awards ceremony Saturday night, honoring top executives involved in philanthropic causes. There's always some press there because the honorees are people who get covered and it's a chance for interviews."

"That could be a target," I said, nodding. "Any other ideas?"

"It's Fleet Week," Nita said. "There's lots of stuff going on. The hotel's full, and there are a ton of events. Plus, the city is crawling with sailors." She said that with a great deal of relish.

"Easy there, tiger," Gemma said with a grin.

"I think something they'd have on TV live is a good possibility," I said. "Then it's less likely that whatever happens would be considered special effects that were added in production, and more people would see it."

Marcia got out her laptop to look up calendars of events. By the time we went to bed, we had a huge list of things that sounded like

they'd be fun to do, but no real idea of which one would be chosen for a magical demonstration. Even if we brought the entire MSI staff in on it, we couldn't cover all these events.

I got up early the next morning and turned on New York One to keep an eye on the local news. So far, they weren't covering any major news event, just the usual weather, crime, and sports. Nita got up soon afterward. "Anything happening yet?" she asked as she staggered into the kitchen.

"Not that's making the news."

"I guess that's good." After pouring herself a bowl of cereal, she joined me in the living room. "I still vote for Fleet Week. Cute guys in uniform."

"We don't get to choose. We're guessing what they'll choose."

"Your chief suspect's a woman, right? So, cute guys in uniform."

"She's a wizard. I don't think she'd consider ordinary guys, especially ones who aren't rich. Sailors aren't known for their wealth."

"Speaking of rich wizards, why aren't you working on this with Owen?"

"Today's his bachelor party. That gives me a good excuse to keep him out of it. I'm pretty sure they're trying to use him as a scapegoat and blame the exposure of magic on him so they can reap the benefits of exposing magic without getting in trouble. He's already suspected, so it's a win-win for them."

"And it's a win-win for you because you get to keep him out of the way of danger while being the super understanding fiancée and letting him enjoy his bachelor party. What kind of debauchery does Rod have planned? Beach house, keg, and high-class exotic dancers? Weekend in Atlantic City? Or Vegas?"

"I think Rod made a case for a big bash like that, but he went with something more Owen's speed. They're going to a baseball game."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Really?"

"That's Owen's idea of a party. He might get wild and crazy and have a beer."

"You two really are made for each other."

I tossed a throw pillow at her, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

When the others got up, we decided to hit a few of the events we'd picked out as possibilities. I wasn't sure what good it would do, since none of us could do anything about magic, but at the very least, I could spot anything hidden and report it. We could add to the feet on the ground and eyes on the city while the rest of the security team looked at other places. Mostly, I needed to do something.

"I still say it'll be the awards ceremony," Marcia said.

"Like that'll make headlines," Gemma said with a soft snort.

"It's at night, so if nothing has happened by then, we can get a

team there,” I said.

“I vote for one of the Fleet Week things,” Nita said. “There’s a SEAL exhibit.”

We ended up going to a Fleet Week event because we doubted Nita was going to give in quietly. Besides, none of us were entirely opposed to the idea of seeing men in uniform. “It’s our patriotic duty to support our brave naval personnel,” Gemma deadpanned as she admired the SEALs answering questions about the displays. With a glance at me, she added, “We could consider this your bachelorette party, since Owen’s out having his fun today. These guys are classier than Chippendales.”

I started to make a scathing response, but then several things clicked together in my brain. “Hmm, an event with cute guys in uniform. Public. On live TV. And Owen’s there. I know what they’re going to hit—the baseball game!”

The others all turned to me. “Oh, wow, you’re right!” Marcia said. “Why didn’t we think about sports? Big crowd, live television. Duh!”

“Do they know about his bachelor party?” Gemma asked.

“Yeah. The suspect even talked about it with her contact.” My phone rang, and I answered it.

“Kathleen?” It was Carmen. “They just had a release faxed over that said something big was happening—”

“At the stadium,” I finished her sentence.

“You knew?”

“I guessed. But thanks for confirming it.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“If I’m very lucky, nothing that anyone will notice.”

“Then I guess I’ll see you there.”

I groaned as I ended the call. I didn’t know if she was coming out of personal curiosity or planning to do a story. Maybe I shouldn’t have told her the truth. I’d figured out the target on my own, after all. Then again, the news that it would be Saturday had helped me figure it out, and would she have told me that if I hadn’t come clean with her?

I immediately called Rod, but didn’t get an answer. The game shouldn’t have started yet, but they were probably already at the stadium because they liked to watch warmups and batting practice. After several rings, it went into voice mail. Was that because he’d turned his phone off for the game or because reception was lousy at the stadium? I supposed it didn’t matter, but I left a message, anyway. “Whatever they’re doing, it’s happening at the game, so get Owen out of there, if you can,” I said.

My next call was to Sam, and he took care of rallying the troops. When I finished that call, I said, “Now, how do we get to the stadium?”

Marcia took command at that point, herding us to the nearest appropriate subway station. “Y’all don’t need to come with me,” I said before we reached the turnstiles. “It could get hairy, and you don’t have the magical immunity I do, so you could be affected.”

“All for one and one for all!” Nita proclaimed enthusiastically. I was especially worried about her because she didn’t yet know the darker side of magic.

“You do know this is probably going to be more Voldemort and less Narnia,” I warned her.

“Duh, Hogwarts had a death count. I know what I might be getting into,” she said.

“Okay, but if I warn you about something, you’ve got to do what I say, immediately. No asking questions, no arguing.”

“Got it,” she said with a salute.

But I wasn’t sure she did.

I really had no idea what we were getting into. What would someone do at a baseball game to prove that magic was real?

We entered the station and Marcia got us on the train we needed. It became more and more crowded as we neared the stadium, full of fans wearing team colors. It was like rush hour, only more monochromatic. I wondered if there were even still tickets available for the game, with this many people going. What if we couldn’t get into the stadium? We didn’t have a magic user with us who could cheat, and I wasn’t sure cheating magically was a great idea when we might run into people who were opposed to magic because they thought it was cheating. Then again, if they were doing something blatantly public, did they even care about stirring up the anti-magic factions anymore? Why worry about a few bloggers when you had TV networks spreading your story?

When the train stopped at the stadium, we joined the flood of people pouring out through the doors. I hooked my arm through Nita’s so we wouldn’t be separated. I tried to keep Gemma’s head in sight. Fortunately, she was tall enough to serve as a beacon.

“Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many people in one place,” Nita said.

“You’re lucky. You don’t commute during the normal rush hour,” I replied.

“This is what it’s like going to work every morning?”

“Well, maybe not this bad.”

Gemma found a spot by a wall, with the throng flowing past her, and I fought my way toward her. Just before I reached her, my phone rang. I didn’t dare stop to answer it, so I hurried forward, hoping the call wouldn’t go to voice mail before I got to the wall. As soon as I was close enough to the wall to not be trampled, I grabbed the phone

without even looking at the caller ID readout. "Hello?" I shouted into it.

"Hey, Katie, it's Trish," the voice said, also shouting, like she was in a noisy environment, as well. "Where are you?"

"We just got off the train at the stadium. I guess Sam called you."

"Yeah, I'm already here, near the front gate. I've got tickets."

That solved that problem—or did it? "How many?" I asked.

"How many do we need?"

"Well, my friends are with me. We may need the help."

"I've got a stack. Apparently, we have some sort of corporate account. Who knew?"

"We'll meet you in a second."

I ended the call and said, "We need to get to the front gate. My coworker Trish has tickets for us." I attempted a grin. "And if we're wrong and nothing ends up happening, hey, we get to go to a baseball game."

"A Yankees game was on my New York wish list," Nita said.

"And you get to crash your fiancé's bachelor party," Gemma said.

"It's not like we're going to catch them doing anything too crazy," Marcia said. "We are talking about Owen here."

I spotted Trish standing near the nearest stadium gate. When we reached her, I made quick introductions, adding, "All of them are in on the secret and know what's going on, so we can talk freely. Well, as freely as we can in this kind of crowd. I take it this is an all-hands situation."

"From what I could tell. Fortunately, I live on this end of town, so I got here pretty quickly. Sam and his people flew in, and I think he called in the other big guns."

I checked my phone to make sure no messages from while I was in the subway had popped up, then tried calling Owen again. No answer. I got the same result when calling Rod. "Now I'm getting worried," I said. "They're not picking up, which means I can't warn them."

"Let's get inside, then," Trish said. "Do you know where they're sitting?"

"No idea."

"They might be in the same block of corporate tickets."

"I think Rod said something about getting tickets from work when he was planning this," Marcia said.

"Then let's start by heading to our seats, in case that's where they are," I said. This would have been a great time for Owen's precognition and strange awareness of what was going on with me to kick in, I thought as we showed our tickets and got through the turnstiles. I concentrated on a sense of alarm and hoped he'd pick up on it. Maybe if he got worried about me, he'd check his phone or call

me.

We'd reached the passage to our section when I heard a voice calling my name—my full name. I resisted the urge to groan when I saw Carmen. She wasn't in full reporter mode, but she looked like she could go on the air at any moment, if called upon. She didn't have a cameraman with her, but I was fairly certain her station already had a sports crew covering the game. "What's going on here?" she asked, looking almost as eager as Nita.

"We don't know yet," I said. "With any luck, nothing will go on, not that most people will notice."

"I'll notice, though, right?"

"It depends on how observant you are."

"You told her?" Trish asked. She only sounded mildly surprised, not shocked and horrified, which I found reassuring.

"We need all the help we can get, and she helped me figure out what was happening," I said. To the rest of my friends, I explained, "Carmen is like me, a magical immune." Turning back to Carmen, I added, "And you might as well join us." I made quick introductions all around before we continued our search for our seats—and, I hoped, the guys.

When we made it close to the row listed on our tickets, I sighed with relief to see the backs of some familiar heads. There was tall, fair-haired Philip, slouched in his seat and looking bored. Next to him was Jake, bopping his head to some inner music (or possibly tiny headphones). Owen was next to him, watching the game intently, and Rod sat beside him. I allowed myself a tiny sigh of relief that at least one thing had gone easily for us. I hoped that was a good sign for the way the rest of the day would go. The guys were caught up enough in the game, which seemed to have just started, not to notice us. Philip, who had little interest in modern baseball, was the first to spot us standing in the aisle beside them. He reached around Jake to nudge Owen, who turned to see us. "Katie? What are you doing here?"

Rod turned and said, "Hey, don't you know that the bride crashing the bachelor party is bad luck?"

"I never heard that," I said.

"Well, it's not cool. You're cramping our style."

"You're not doing anything worth cramping," I said.

"But we might. Ah, but we might."

"Well, we wouldn't have to be here if you'd answer your phones."

"We made a pact. No distraction by phones while we're here. Plus, it meant that Owen had an excuse for not being available for you-know-who."

"I'd bet she's here," I said. "I'm pretty sure the game is their venue for their big demonstration."

Owen slapped himself on the forehead. "Of course. It's very public, on TV, and she knows I'm here. How did I miss that?"

"Anyway, the gang's all here, and we need to get you out of here so they can't blame whatever shenanigans happen here on you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Owen protested. "You'll need me to help counter whatever they try to do."

"They've called an all-hands. We have plenty of other people here to handle this," I said, but that worked about as well as I'd expected it to, which wasn't at all. Unfortunately, I didn't have any of the knockout potion with me, so I wasn't likely to be able to get him out of there without him kicking up a fuss that would be noticed, and he was right. Short of Merlin, he was the best wizard we had, and Merlin didn't seem to be here yet, so we'd probably need Owen.

Since we weren't going to win this argument, I figured we might as well stay with the guys. Our seats were in the row behind them, so I gestured for the others to go ahead and find their seats. Gemma and Marcia filed in, Nita and I followed them, and Trish and Carmen came in behind us.

As soon as Carmen took her seat, she gasped. "Oh. My. God," she said, staring at the top of the stadium, where gargoyles were perched so they could watch the field. "They aren't always here, are they? I don't think I've seen them before."

"No, they're just here to handle things today," I said. "They're our security team."

"What's she talking about?" Nita asked, squinting in the direction of Carmen's stare.

"She's seeing something that's veiled by magic," Gemma explained. "That means we're out of luck. We won't see it."

"Who's this?" Rod asked, gesturing toward Carmen.

"This is Carmen. She's a magical immune who saw enough to realize what was going on," I said. The full explanation and any apologies could wait until the immediate crisis was averted.

I felt an intense surge of magic, followed immediately by another one. "Hey, wait, I think I do see something!" Nita said, pointing. "Oh, no, now it's gone. Maybe I just imagined it."

"No, there was magic," I said, rubbing my arms to try to make the goosebumps subside.

"Probably that veil drop they attempted on the building, but Sam and his people countered it," Rod said.

"So, I did see gargoyles on top of the stadium?" Nita said.

"Probably," I said.

"Let's hope no one else did," Owen said.

"Who looks at the stadium roof during a game?" Gemma remarked.

“Well, now we know that we were right about what event they were hitting,” I said. “If they tried to unveil the gargoyles, this must be the place, so everyone, keep your eyes peeled and be ready to take action.”

Jake peered at the field with binoculars. “Whoa, what’s that?” he wondered out loud, pointing toward the batter. We weren’t that far away, so I could see the batter fairly clearly without binoculars, but I wasn’t quite sure what Jake had noticed. Only after staring at the batter for a few seconds did I notice that something funny was happening with the bat. Like, it was sprouting leaves. No sooner did I notice the oddity than it was gone. Jake turned to Owen with a grin. “I told you that spell would come in handy.”

“Which one did you use?” Owen asked. “The McKetchney or the Ferguson?”

“Y’all can discuss magic theory later,” I said. “For now, focus!” I turned to my friends. “Let’s divide and conquer. I’d like an immune and a nonmagical person to work together so you can be sure to spot what’s veiled and what everyone else can see. Nita, you’re with me. Carmen, you and Gemma work together. Trish, team up with Marcia. We’ll look at the roof and sky, Carmen’s team can focus on the stands, and Trish’s team will keep an eye on the field. The moment you see something even slightly odd, tell the wizards.”

“What, exactly, are we looking for?” Nita asked, squinting as she scanned the sky.

“Anything even remotely weird. If you see something that you even think might be magical, let me know. And I’ll be running what I see by you because there are things I can see that most people won’t. You don’t see any gargoyles now, do you?” I saw at least three on the roof over the bleachers and several more circled the sky over the stadium.

“Nope, they’re gone,” she said.

I heard the others calling things out to each other, but I tried not to get distracted. From what I could tell, they were all little oddities, and if our gang wasn’t taking care of them, the security forces that had convened were doing the job. I didn’t know how many people we had on-site by now, but as far as I could tell, the rest of the fans weren’t noticing anything odd about the game.

I saw a large shape in the sky heading toward the stadium, and it got larger as it drew closer. “Do you see that?” I asked Nita, pointing. “See what?” she asked.

Now I could tell that it was a dragon. It was close enough and obvious enough that if it hadn’t been veiled, people would definitely have been reacting, even if they just thought it was a kite or balloon. I called Sam and said, “I don’t know if your guys can see it, but we’ve

got a dragon approaching the stadium.”

“A dragon?” Nita squeaked.

“It’s still veiled,” I reported into the phone, “but I have a feeling that won’t be for long.” This, I was certain, was the big demonstration. The other things had probably been meant to distract us and test what the response would be, but it would be very hard to explain away a dragon attacking either the field or the fans during a baseball game that was being aired on live television, possibly on both coasts. And I’d bet that they had someone set up to use magic to stop it, since the dragon in and of itself wasn’t necessarily proof of magic. Or did they expect our wizards to step up to defend the crowd from the dragon, so they were the ones to use magic in public, even if it was to save people?

“Can’t you guys keep it away from the stadium?” I asked Sam. The gargoyles circled the dragon like they were trying to herd it, but it didn’t veer from its course.

“I think it’s under a spell. It’s actin’ like it doesn’t even notice us,” Sam reported.

“Well, whatever you do, don’t let its veil drop. I bet they’re about to expose it.”

“It can still attack while it’s veiled,” Sam warned.

I leaned forward and tapped Owen on the shoulder. “We’ve got a dragon incoming. Sam’s gargoyles can’t get it to turn away. They’re trying to keep it veiled, but he thinks it’s enchanted. Do you think your taming spell would do any good?”

He looked up, and I supposed the dragon wasn’t veiled to him—validating my theory that he was meant to do something to stop it—because he reacted like he saw it. “I might be able to make it tamer, but I’m not sure I can override the compulsion to come here. And I’m not sure what the range is on that spell.”

“We have to let it get in the stadium before you can stop it?” I was alarmed enough that I barely kept my voice down.

“I’ll try before it gets here, but no guarantees on when it will start working.”

“And can you do it in a way that doesn’t look like you’re doing magic? Because I think the plan was for you to out magic for them by valiantly saving the crowd from a dragon. I guess she doesn’t know that you have other ways of dealing with dragons.”

“Or she was counting on her spells making me do what she wanted. Good thing you spotted that.” He laced his fingers together and stretched his arms out, flexing his wrists, then separated his hands, wiggled his fingers, and began making subtle gestures as he murmured under his breath. I could feel the magic around him building.

Meanwhile, the dragon kept coming.

"Do you see anything yet?" I asked Nita.

"No. I guess that's good, huh? Though I would kind of like to see a dragon. Dragons are real?"

"Yes. But don't count on them giving you a ride. It doesn't work that way. That I know of." My experience with dragons had mostly been limited to an encounter with a small colony that had been living adjacent to the sewers. I wasn't sure what they were like in the wild.

"It's not responding to my suggestions to turn away," Owen said. I could tell that much because the dragon had cleared the edge of the stadium and was directly overhead. It circled above the field, at about the level of the roof over the stands, but it didn't show any sign of aggression. It cast a shadow on the field, but I couldn't tell if anyone else might see it. At least the shadow was just a blob, not anything obviously dragon-shaped.

"I think I see—" Nita said, but then she shook her head. "No, it's gone. It was like just for a split second there was a shimmer in the sky, and I thought I saw wings. Or it could have been my imagination because that's what I'm looking for."

"No, they tried to unveil it, but Sam's guys must have got to it," Owen said, still staring at the sky.

I supposed this was when the dragon was supposed to attack, but it wasn't showing any signs of hostility. It circled lazily. Even if it had been visible to most of the crowd, it could have possibly been written off as a kite being towed by an airplane.

"Oh, wow, that's really a dragon," Carmen said.

"Eyes on your sector," I ordered.

"But, dragon! I'm so glad you clued me in before I saw this."

The dragon came closer, and I braced myself. I knew Owen wouldn't let it roast thousands of people, even if it did mean outing himself as a wizard and getting in all kinds of trouble for doing so, but I still couldn't help but imagine flames coming at me. The dragon opened its mouth, but it only yawned. It spread its wings, letting them fill with air so they functioned like a parachute to slow its descent until it hit the field, just in front of the outfield wall, where it curled up and promptly fell asleep.

Owen let out his breath in a big "whoosh" and sank back against his seat. "I don't know how long that will hold, and I hope no one hits anything toward that part of the wall," he said. "Maybe I should get over there and see if there are some spells I can untangle and then deepen my control."

He started to get up, but Rod stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Maybe you'd better leave this to Sam and his team. I don't think you want to be anywhere near that dragon right now." He gestured with

his chin behind us, and I saw someone wearing all black coming down the steps a few sections over. It looked like the Council was here.

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“Oh, great,” I said, turning away from the Council people in the vain hope that maybe they wouldn’t notice us if they didn’t see my face. “Now you’ll get caught and maybe blamed when you try to stop the next thing that happens.”

“Will the bad guys bother doing anything else, since we stopped the dragon?” Nita asked. “We did stop the dragon, right? I mean, you stopped the dragon. The rest of us didn’t really do anything.”

“It was a team effort,” Owen said over his shoulder to Nita, who smiled.

“Turn around,” I muttered to Owen. When he was no longer facing the Council people, I added, “The dragon’s asleep in the outfield, and the gargoyles have it covered. And would you give up so easily? After all they’ve done, I don’t think they’re just going to shrug and walk away now.”

“Don’t you have a good idea who’s doing this?” Gemma asked. “If we could find and distract that person, that should stop the hijinks. And you’d catch her red-handed.”

“Find her? In this crowd?” I asked, gesturing to the stadium.

“We should be able to follow the magic,” Owen said.

“Oh. Right. I’m sure she’s using plenty of it. I could probably sense it, but I’ll have to get away from y’all while you’re doing spells to counter what she’s doing.”

I got up and edged down the row. Nita followed me, saying, “We’re a team, right?”

Owen also got up. “Uh uh, you stay here,” I said, holding up my hand in a “stop” gesture.

“I won’t let her enchant me again,” he protested.

“Yeah, but if the magic’s coming from her, and if you’re nearby when the enforcers trace it back there, it won’t look good for you. You stay here and keep an eye on that dragon,” I said.

Instead, Jake joined us. “I’m bored with the game, anyway,” he said with a shrug as he climbed over Philip.

Nita gave him an uncharacteristically shy smile. “Hi, I’m Nita. I’m Katie’s friend.”

“Jake. Owen’s assistant.”

“So, you’re a wizard, huh?” Was she batting her eyelashes? Now?

“Yeah, but I’m also in a band.”

“Oh?”

“Come on,” I said, urging them along. “You can flirt later.”

“I wasn’t,” she said, at the exact time he said, “I’m not.” They both

laughed. I herded them up the steps to the concourse. There, I paused, trying to feel where the magic was strongest. It was pretty obvious, and I hurried to my right. We'd barely made it to the next aisle when we ran into Mack, the Council enforcer.

"I'm almost afraid to ask what you're up to," he said, sounding weary. "But I shouldn't be surprised to see you here. You're always around when there's trouble."

"That's because dealing with trouble is my job," I said. "And before you say anything, Owen's not responsible for the stuff going on here. He's stopping it."

"I didn't say anything. You notice I'm not going after him."

As a matter of fact . . . "Where are you going, then?" I asked.

"There are three big sources of magic around here right now: your friends back there in the stands, the gargoyles on the field around the dragon, and something in this direction. As you said, your friends and the gargoyles seem to be cleaning things up rather than causing problems, so I'm going to check out this lead."

"Great minds think alike," I said. "That's what we're doing."

He resumed walking. "Well, come on."

I was surprised that he didn't object to us tagging along, but I didn't dare say anything, lest he have second thoughts. Maybe he thought an immune would be an asset.

"Who's he?" Nita whispered to me.

"He's basically the magic police."

The sense of magic grew stronger and stronger, and I wondered what Matilda was up to now. She was definitely up to something.

Nita shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. "Brr. Feels like someone walked over my grave," she said.

"That's magic," I told her. "Strong magic nearby." It was making my necklace go into overdrive. Matilda—or whoever it was—was really close, and doing something big.

"Really? I've always felt that, especially around your grandmother."

"She's a wizard," I said without thinking. I was too busy trying to focus on the source of magic.

"You know, that explains so much."

Mack paused, holding up a hand to stop us. I pointed to where a woman stood silhouetted in the arch leading to the seating section ahead. A slight breeze whipped her perfect blond hair around her. I wasn't sure what she was doing, but she was using a lot of power. I ran over to the next aisle to see what was going on. The dragon on the field was stirring. It lifted its head, then abruptly slumped down again. Its tail twitched and went still. She must have been trying to wake it, while our people kept countering her spells. We had a magical tug-of-

war going on. It was one person against our team, but she'd also enchanted the dragon in the first place, which might have given her more control.

"Don't you see that?" a voice a few rows ahead of me called out. It was a familiar voice, but I couldn't place it in context. When it added, "Don't you see the dragon?" I froze in near panic. Had Matilda managed to drop the veil, or was the person shouting a magical immune? Scanning the crowd below me, I saw a woman waving her arms—Abigail Williams. No one else reacted, and though I couldn't see their faces, the body language I could see implied some skepticism. At least, I hoped it did.

But with the anti-magic forces there, I couldn't take the risk that our gang might not overpower Matilda. If that dragon became visible to ordinary people, there would be no going back on this story, and it would validate the views of some pretty toxic people. I had to do something to skew the odds in our favor.

There were only a few people in the back row, so I slipped down the row, apologizing when I had to step over someone. When I was a couple of seats away from the next aisle, I looked up to see what Matilda was doing. Her eyes were closed, so she probably hadn't seen me approaching, and her face was beaded with sweat. I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and looked to find Jake across the aisle from me, doing what I'd done, but from the other side. With the anti-magic folks and at least one magical immune nearby, him using magic on her would have been almost as bad as the dragon being exposed. I caught his eye, shook my head, and gestured in the general direction of Abigail. I couldn't tell if he understood the full message, but he nodded and lowered his hands.

No, this was probably a situation best handled nonmagically. I looked around for something I could do or use and saw a soda cup with only ice and perhaps some dregs of soda left sitting in the cup holder in front of me and asked the lady in the nearest seat, "Are you through with that?"

"It's just ice left," she said with a shrug.

"That's okay. In fact, it's what I want." I scooped up the cup and made it to the end of the row. Matilda was only a few feet away. I was pretty sure I could reach her with the ice. I drew back my arm, preparing to hurl the ice and soda dregs at her, but a commotion nearby made me pause.

A stadium security guard had approached Abigail from below. I supposed she'd made enough of a scene that someone had been sent to look into it. I glanced down at the cup I held. This would be a really bad time to attack Matilda. To the security guard, it would look like assault, and I doubted that "but she was doing magic" would fly as an

excuse. But we had to stop her, and I didn't dare delay. It was probably a misdemeanor, at worst, and I knew my employer wouldn't fire me for having a record, especially one obtained in the line of duty. It looked like it was my time to take one for the team.

Mack had come up behind Matilda, but he seemed unable to make the final approach. Had she shielded herself? I caught his eye, and when he nodded, I swallowed the lump in my throat and shouted, "Boo!" as I sprang out in front of Matilda and threw the cup of ice in her face.

Regardless of what happened to me, it was totally worth it, not just because it completely stopped the flow of magic coming from her, but also because the expression on her face was utterly priceless. If her face froze like that, Sam might even be able to add her to the gargoyle corps. As a bonus, her hair immediately frizzed when the moisture struck it. I knew that perfection couldn't have been natural.

While she was distracted, Mack moved in with his silver chain of binding. "We need to have a chat," he said as he pulled her back into the concourse.

I braced myself for the security guard's approach, or at least a shout of something along the lines of "Hold it right there!" But no one said anything. No one around us even acted like anything odd had happened. I knew New York crowds could sometimes get rowdy, but I would have thought that a woman throwing a drink on another woman might have at least got a reaction from the onlookers. I turned to see Jake grinning at me. "Don't worry, I had you covered," he said, and my legs went wobbly with relief. It was nice to know I wasn't going to be arrested.

Before I headed to the concourse to join Mack, I glanced down at the field to see that the dragon was motionless once more. Nita came down to Jake and me and I asked her, "What do you see down there?"

"A baseball game?" she said with a shrug. "Don't ask me to explain what's going on. My brother plays cricket. I never understood baseball." I laughed and hooked my arm through hers, mostly to cover the fact that I wasn't sure I could make it up the steps on my own. "I take it this means we won?" she said.

"Looks like it," I said.

We went back into the concourse to see Mack talking to Matilda. If any of the baseball fans passing by thought there was anything odd about a man in black interrogating a woman whose hands were chained behind her back with what looked like a delicate necklace, they didn't say or do anything. I wasn't even sure they could see it.

"What is the meaning of this?" Matilda demanded. "First I get assaulted, then you falsely accuse me."

"Ma'am, you were the only source of magic in that area, and once

you stopped, all the other sources of magic stopped.”

“I’m being framed!” she claimed. “They only stopped so I would look bad.”

“Nice try,” he said. “I’m sure you weren’t working alone, but you were involved.”

“You have no evidence. Do you know who I am?”

“Lady, that’s the last thing you ever want to say to a cop.”

“My family has connections on the Council.”

“How nice for you. Now, come on.”

“I guess it’s over, huh?” Nita said as we watched Mack haul Matilda away.

“Maybe,” I said. “It depends on how deep this goes. We know she has accomplices, but will they act up while she’s in custody?”

“There’s also her family,” Jake said. “Who knows what they might do.”

“So we’d better be vigilant,” I said. I barely ducked away in time as a few of the anti-magic group passed us. It looked like they were too busy complaining to each other about Abigail’s behavior to notice me. I could only hope that Abigail’s credibility had been thoroughly shot. Yeah, she was right, but she was doing awful things with that information, so I didn’t feel as bad about keeping the truth from her as I’d felt with Carmen. The fewer followers she had, the better.

We headed back toward our seats. “Is this is what your life is like all the time?” Nita asked.

“More or less, yeah,” I said.

“I seldom leave the lab,” Jake said. “My work is more theoretical. But it’s fun to occasionally apply it in the field.”

“Thanks for the cover-up back there,” I said to him.

He shrugged. “Well, I figured that magic to hide magic was about all I could get away with, and you getting arrested would kind of ruin Owen’s bachelor party.”

“You mean more than a magical battle did?” Nita asked.

“The magical battle is actually pretty fun,” he said, grinning. “More interesting to me than baseball, to be honest.”

When we got back to the others, I saw that Merlin had joined them. “Apologies for the delay,” he said. “It took longer than I expected to make it here. I trust that everything is in hand?”

“Mack got her,” I said as we took our seats.

“And just in time, too,” Rod said. “It was taking all of us to keep that dragon knocked out. She was pretty determined.”

“What will happen to the dragon?” I asked.

“I’ve already put in a call to the sanctuary,” Owen said. “They’ll take care of it after the game.”

“Now, I suppose we should leave you to your bachelor party,” I

said. "It's not cool for the bride to crash the fun."

Owen caught my wrist. "No, don't go. I mean, unless you want to. But you're welcome to stay."

"It's not as though we were going to be up to any debauchery, anyway," Rod added.

I looked to my friends. "I haven't been to a game in forever," Trish said.

"We might as well, while we're here," Gemma said.

"I'm game," Marcia said.

"Ditto," said Nita.

"Do you mind if I join you?" Carmen asked.

"You're welcome to," I said.

"Would having your boss here ruin the fun?" Merlin asked. "I've been curious about baseball."

"The bigger the party, the better," Owen said. "I'm hungry. Does anyone want a hot dog? My treat."

We seemed to have been given a respite after the great ballgame dragon taming. I'd worried that catching Matilda wouldn't necessarily stop anything if her family was still out there, but by Tuesday, I still hadn't seen any reports of anything that sounded like real magic on any of the blogs, and Carmen said she hadn't received any news releases. The Abigail Williams blog had just about fizzled out, and I hoped that meant her group was defunct.

With the case closed, I was free to worry about my upcoming wedding. I got through my bachelorette party—a spa day arranged by Gemma—without any of the drama that had hit Owen's bachelor party. No dragons, no gargoyles, no guests with wings that I hadn't specifically invited. It was almost a disappointment. I was starting to worry that things were a bit too easy. But there was still time for crazy things to happen at the wedding rehearsal. I wondered if weddings were like stage plays, where a disastrous dress rehearsal was considered an omen of a good opening night.

Our rehearsal was pretty low-key, with only the people directly involved in the ceremony there—and not even all of them. We waited until everyone had left work for the weekend on Friday evening, and then the wizards helping us with the wedding created the magical decorations, turning the office building's cathedral-like lobby into something that looked like a chapel in a magical forest. It sounds weird to have a wedding in an office building, but when your office building looks like mine and when that building has a lot to do with your relationship, it makes sense.

Even on its own, that lobby is gorgeous, but the magical decor was beyond my wildest wedding dreams. A forest glade seemed to have sprouted from the tile floor, with tiny lights twinkling among the

branches. Garlands of white flowers arched overhead, creating a canopy over the aisle. The seats were scattered among the trees rather than lined up in neat rows. The ceremony itself would take place on the first landing of the grand staircase, where there were more trees, their branches creating an arch overhead.

Since my father wouldn't be at this ceremony (I could only imagine what he'd think of it), Merlin was walking me down the aisle. I'd grown used to the idea of him being my boss, but the thought that the Merlin, such a legendary figure, was playing the father role at my wedding was a little overwhelming.

Gemma, who was serving as wedding coordinator, got everyone positioned just so, with Owen and Rod standing on the steps in front of the landing and my bridesmaids lined up in front of Merlin and me. The pastor, from Owen's boyhood church, would be arriving with Owen's foster parents the next day. As he'd said, he'd done so many weddings he could do them in his sleep, so he hardly needed to rehearse. I would have liked the chance to run through what I would have to do in the ceremony itself, but I supposed it wasn't really a performance.

Magical music played, and the bridesmaids walked down the aisle to arrange themselves on the stairs. Then it was my turn. I'd been practicing walking in my gown around the apartment, but I was a little worried about navigating the aisle and the stairs in it. It was a shame that I couldn't wear it for the rehearsal. Maybe I'd get a chance to practice climbing the steps in the gown before the wedding, I thought, and I was so sidetracked by the thought that I nearly stumbled on the steps in my ordinary clothes and shoes. That didn't bode well.

Merlin held my arm, steadying me. "Feel free to levitate me, if necessary," I said sheepishly.

"You'll be fine," he assured me as he placed my hand in Owen's.

"So, there will be the ceremony, 'I do,' rings, and all that," Gemma called out. "Okay, now let's practice the recessional. Everyone knows their positions?" I didn't see how anyone didn't. She'd sent enough charts and diagrams.

The attendants had made it down the steps, and Owen and I were just starting to make our own descent when I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and nearly missed a step. This time, it was Owen who caught me. I was just about to make a quip about the stairs not being such a great idea when I saw Trix whispering to Merlin. That must have been the motion I'd noticed. Fairies didn't usually shrink to Tinkerbell size and swoop around, at least, not around humans, so I wondered what was up.

We made it back down the aisle, and Gemma applauded. "I think

that should do it,” she said. “Is everyone comfortable with what they’re doing? Any questions?”

Rina, who planned events for the company and who was helping with the wedding, stepped forward and said, “After that, we’ll transform to reception mode. We’ve got the spells in place to do that. Would you like to see?”

“Sure,” I said, curious how this would go.

Rina and her team waved their hands and muttered spells, and soon the room was filled with small tables that gave the impression of a magical woodland picnic. I half expected to see the Mad Hatter and the White Rabbit having tea, with Winnie the Pooh and his friends at the adjacent table. “It’s lovely,” I said, but I was still distracted by whatever Trix had told Merlin. He was frowning and didn’t seem to be paying much attention to his surroundings. I didn’t think he’d even noticed that he was now sitting at a table.

Rina reset the lobby to wedding mode, and the rehearsal was over. We were going to gather at a restaurant for dinner, but first I wanted a chat with Merlin. I grew more alarmed when he approached us first. “You should know that Matilda Mayfair has been released on bond,” he said.

“What?” I protested, trying not to shriek out loud.

“I’m not surprised,” Owen said. “With that kind of money and power, I doubted they’d have held her forever.”

“You don’t think she’ll do something, do you?” I asked.

“I don’t think you should worry about it,” Merlin said. “You concentrate on your wedding.”

“We should be safe,” Owen said, giving my hand a squeeze. “After all, their plan has been to do things in public, and this wedding is too private for them to bother with. It’s also already magical.”

“Yeah, you have a point there,” I said. “It’s hardly going to be earthshattering if someone uses magic at a magical wedding in a magical office building.” It was reassuring when I thought about it that way. The wedding would likely be the safest place to be. But then that made me worry about something else. “That’s probably when they’ll do something else in public, though,” I said. “They’ll know that most of the people who’ve been defeating them will be here tomorrow night. I wonder what else is going on in the city.”

“As I said, you don’t have to worry about that,” Merlin said. “The Council is apparently monitoring Miss Mayfair and her associates, and we do have people who won’t be attending the wedding who will be watching the city. Prophets and Lost is scrying to monitor the situation and predict where they might strike next. But you two are officially off-duty until you return from your honeymoon and the ceremony in Texas.”

“Well, let’s just hope they can do it all without me,” I said.

It was easier than I would have expected to follow Merlin’s advice and not worry about Matilda and her plotting. It helped that I had so much going on with my wedding. My friends hustled me home right after dinner so I could get my beauty sleep and be well-rested. We had a girls’ brunch the next morning, then it was time for makeup and hair styling. We gathered all the wedding supplies and headed to the office building that afternoon, where my office had been turned into a dressing room, complete with three-way mirror.

Since we were ahead of schedule, as soon as I had my dress and shoes on, I went out to the lobby and practiced walking down the aisle and up and down the steps a few times. The skirt was stiff enough that it didn’t tangle around my legs, so it was easier than I’d feared. I thought I might actually get through this without falling flat on my face.

After my last trip up the stairs to the temporary altar, I paused and looked back at the decorated lobby. I remembered the first time I’d walked into this building, nearly two years earlier. I’d had no idea how much my life would be changed by that job interview. I’d learned that magic was real and that my utter ordinariness was so extreme that it counted as a superpower. I’d already met Owen, but then I’d learned what he really was. I’d been attracted to him, but I’d never have imagined then that we’d have ended up married.

And now, here I was, part of the magical world even though I was totally lacking in magic, about to marry the wizard of my dreams in the lobby of a magical corporation’s office building. In all my childhood daydreams about how my wedding would look, this hadn’t been on the list. It was beyond anything I might have imagined actually happening to me.

“Katie! There you are!” Gemma cried out as she rushed toward me. “The guests’ll be arriving soon, so you need to go back to your office.”

“It’s that late?” I asked.

“Believe it or not.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, in a little over an hour, you’ll be married. I won’t even ask if you want to get out of here because I know you don’t.”

“I’ll admit, I’m a little nervous about the wedding, but not at all about getting married.”

“That’s a good sign.”

I made it rather gracefully down the steps, and she nodded approvingly. “I should have thought about finding a way for you to practice without dragging your dress down here, but it looks like you’ll do fine. Now that I’ve seen you on these steps, I wish we’d got a gown with a train. It would have looked awesome trailing down those

steps behind you.”

“But just imagine the potential for disaster. That really would have taken practice.”

“And it would have been overkill for the ceremony back home, which might have made people wonder, since you’re supposedly having a City Hall wedding here.”

We made it back to my office, where Nita had just opened a bottle of champagne. “I think this occasion calls for a toast,” she said, splashing champagne into plastic cups.

“I’m not sure me drinking right now is a great idea,” I said, eyeing the cup she handed me.

“Oh, come on, it’s like a tablespoon,” she said. “Even you aren’t going to get so tipsy you can’t walk on a tablespoon of champagne.”

Once all the cups had been distributed, Nita raised hers and said, “To Katie, Owen, and fairytale romances. May you live happily ever after.”

Once we’d all touched our cups together—carefully, so there was no sloshing—I took a sip, letting the drink fizz on my tongue. Nita was right about the small amount in the cup, so downing the whole drink in one swallow was barely an achievement.

“Lipstick check!” Gemma ordered. I turned to face her while she touched up my lipstick and added a slight coat of gloss. “Don’t tell me you’re getting teary-eyed,” she said as she inspected the rest of my makeup.

I hadn’t realized I was, but my eyes were stinging. Nita’s toast had triggered a burst of emotions. I loved all my friends so much, and I was glad they were here with me. I wanted to tell them, but I was afraid if I did I’d set all of us off. I was determined not to be the kind of bride who was late to my own wedding, and crying with my bridesmaids to the point we all had to redo our makeup would get in the way of that goal. Still, I tucked a tissue into my bouquet, just in case.

Gemma checked her watch. “Okay, it’s about time. I’ll run up to see if they’re ready.”

The butterflies in my stomach woke up at the realization that this was it. I checked myself in the mirror and almost didn’t recognize myself. I really did look like a bride. Wow.

“You look great,” Nita reassured me.

“But still like you,” Marcia added. “I hate it when brides look so fake, it’s like they’re totally different people for their wedding.”

Gemma returned. “They’re ready. Let’s go.”

The security department had an exit that led directly into the vestibule outside the lobby, and that’s where we went. It was a little crowded in there with my bridesmaids, me, Merlin, and my dress.

“Oh, my, you look lovely, Miss Chandler,” Merlin said when he held his arm out for me.

The music began, and the vestibule doors opened. I avoided looking out into the lobby as the bridesmaids began their walk down the aisle. Merlin and I held back until the last second, when the music changed and I heard a rustle as everyone stood. We moved to the doorway and began walking.

It was pretty much the way things had been the night before, only with more people, but I barely noticed the details as I looked straight down the aisle to see Owen, looking even more handsome than usual in his white tie and tails, looking back at me. It wasn't the formalwear that made him look so good, now that I considered it. It was the way he smiled so much he practically glowed.

I smiled in return as Merlin and I made our way down the aisle. The setting really was magical, with all those flowers and tiny lights overhead.

But then I saw a gleam in the canopy of flowers over the altar at the landing. I didn't recall that having been there before. It wasn't lights. It looked like sharp, polished metal, hanging right over where Owen stood.

I stopped in the middle of the aisle and called out, "Owen! Above you!"

Just as he looked up, a metal object swung down from above. He ducked, but at the same time, he waved a hand, and the scythe-like thing turned into a shower of flowers.

I looked above me and saw similar gleams in the garlands over the aisle. Tugging on Merlin's arm, I said, "They're over us, too."

I heard a swishing sound, ducked, and was soon pelted with flowers. We'd planned for petals to drop like snow at the end of the ceremony, so I supposed this was a sneak preview. Better than us being decapitated. I suspected the blades had been hidden by magical veils, and that's why none of the people setting up for the wedding had seen them. I'd been so busy looking at the floor earlier when I was practicing walking that I must not have noticed anything then.

When had they been put up there, and how?

But the real question was who had done it, and were they here now? I scanned the wedding guests who were ducking for cover, looking for anyone I didn't recognize. I couldn't imagine that anyone close enough to us to be invited to a fairly intimate wedding would try to kill us or even disrupt the wedding, and I doubted anyone who'd be in one of the more outrageous factions would have been on the guest list. That left the staff.

While the food was magically conjured, there had been people hired to serve it and attend to the guests. As Owen had warned me, there was too much that could go wrong with spells used to pass trays of canapés. I hated to be the kind of person who jumped to the conclusion that the help must be to blame, but they were the only people here we didn't know well.

I heard a whoosh overhead and instinctively ducked, until I realized the sound was a gargoyle flying in. "You got a target, doll?" Sam asked.

I picked up my skirts and ran for the staging area where the catering staff waited. Most of them seemed as baffled as the guests were, but one guy turned away as I approached. "Him!" I cried out, pointing.

When he made a run for it, I recognized the guy I'd come to think of as the "puppy." I wasn't sure where he thought he was going or how he was going to get anywhere, considering that he was in the middle of a crowd of wizards. He was swarmed instantly, and frozen by so many spells hitting him simultaneously that I figured it would

be weeks of intricate work before they could all be untangled.

With him out of the way, I scanned the ceiling for anything else I might have missed and checked the trees for booby traps. Once I was certain that there was nothing else hidden to attack me or my guests, I said, “Sorry about that, folks, but this is actually pretty normal for our life. It’s only fitting that our wedding reflects our true selves, I guess. But now let’s take it from where we left off.”

There was a titter of uncomfortable laughter, then someone—Rod, I think—started clapping. The rest of the guests picked it up, and I headed back to the aisle to an enthusiastic round of applause. This wasn’t quite what I’d imagined for my wedding, but as I’d said, it was pretty typical. I figured it would make a great story in the future. It was a pity I’d have to limit who I told it to.

I’d almost made it back to Merlin when someone grabbed me. “Nobody move!” a female voice called out from behind me. I couldn’t see who it was, but based on the angle of the arm around my neck, which bent me backward, I suspected it was Matilda. She began walking down the aisle, dragging me with her. Just walking in that dress had been a challenge. Not tripping over it while in a headlock was nearly impossible. As she walked, she ranted. “Why do you keep choosing the wrong side?” she shouted at Owen. “Do you know what you could be? And yet you choose to work in your little lab, marry such an ordinary person. Why do we hide ourselves away? You’re having a secret wedding so you can use magic. You should be able to have a ceremony like this anywhere. We’re wizards! But instead of helping me, you stopped me.”

Owen moved slowly down the steps toward us. “You’re wrong about so many things,” he said, his voice soft but still ringing throughout the space. “But one thing in particular is going to be your downfall.”

“Don’t come any closer!” Matilda warned. “Or something will happen to your bride.”

He raised a hand and made a casual gesture. A surge of magic hit us. I immediately felt the pressure on my neck ease as she fell away from me. I heard a muffled thud when she hit the carpet covering the aisle. “You said she was ordinary,” Owen said, coming to stand over Matilda. “But she’s immune to magic, which is pretty extraordinary. And that means I could hit you with whatever I wanted without hurting her.” Turning to me, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, rubbing my neck. I hoped she hadn’t left red marks that would ruin the pictures. Not that I’d be able to show the pictures from this wedding to everyone in my life, but still.

Sam directed his crew to haul a still-frozen Matilda away. Gemma then called out, “Can we take five and reset? Let’s start all over

again.”

Coming down the steps, she came toward me and took my arm. “You’ll have her back in a minute,” she told Owen as she took me back to my office. There, she poured out the last few drops from Nita’s champagne bottle. “Here, you could probably use this,” she said.

If the tablespoon of champagne I’d had earlier hadn’t affected me, I doubted these drops would make much difference, but she was right. I needed the drink. Even just the moisture in my mouth helped. A sudden giggle burst out of me before I was aware it was coming, and that giggle led to another, and soon I was laughing uncontrollably.

“I know you didn’t get enough alcohol to cause that,” Gemma said. “Are you okay?”

I couldn’t control myself enough to speak, but I gave her a thumbs-up gesture. Finally, I was able to stop laughing long enough to take a couple of deep breaths, and then I could speak. “Sorry, it’s just funny,” I said between giggles. “Even my wedding spirals out of control with magic. And to think, I used to see myself as boring and ordinary.”

“I don’t know that you’ve ever been boring, at least, not as long as I’ve known you.”

“Really?”

“Really. When we were in college, I always admired how you just did your own thing, without worrying about whether or not it was cool.”

“It was that obvious how uncool I was?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. What I noticed was that you didn’t care. When you moved to New York, you didn’t try to fit in. You’re always you, wherever you go. I bet that has a lot to do with why Owen’s drawn to you. When I found out where you fit into all the magic stuff, it made so much sense. You see past all the things that everyone else tries to hide behind.”

I pondered this for a moment. “You know, I think I’m okay with all this—even the magical battle in the middle of my wedding. It wouldn’t have felt like it was really my wedding if nothing weird had happened.”

“And we haven’t even made it to the reception yet. Now, let’s see if I can fix your eye makeup. I used waterproof mascara, but even that might not have been enough to withstand that laughing fit. I hope you have it all out of your system.”

“Yeah, I think I’m under control now,” I said. But my face hurt from grinning, and my abs felt like I’d done a hundred crunches.

Gemma attacked the area under my eyes with powder before touching up my mascara and lipstick, then declared me ready to get married. We went back to the vestibule and prepared to repeat the process—this time, without our enemies showing up, I hoped.

While the bridesmaids moved down the aisle, I stood at the doorway, studying the whole lobby area to look for hidden booby traps or other hazards. I looked around at the guests for anyone who seemed out of place. I almost missed my cue when it was my turn to walk down the aisle, but I hadn't noticed anything that looked like trouble, so I stepped forward.

I made it all the way down the aisle this time and gave Owen a smile of relief as I came to stand at his side and took his hand. I tried to stay in the moment and focus on what was happening, but I couldn't help but replay our lives up to this moment—seeing him on the subway, the first job interview when he'd barely managed to speak to me, learning he was a wizard, all those times we went out together but weren't officially dating, the first kiss under the spell of the enchanted red shoes, the fairy godmother who kept nearly getting us killed while she tried to get us together even though we were already together, him coming to Texas when I fled in an attempt to protect him, him meeting me at the airport when I returned, nearly losing him in a fight against our enemies, falling in love all over again in the elven realms when we didn't remember who we were, and breaking the spell with a kiss.

Yeah, there was nothing ordinary about either of us, now that I thought about it. And yet, the times I really treasured with him involved sitting at home, watching movies, and eating pizza. My work was bound to offer plenty of excitement. I'd be okay with our personal lives being nice and dull.

I forced myself to focus on the present when the pastor finished his welcoming remarks and we began our vows. I wanted to remember saying these words that I sincerely meant. Owen's cheeks flushed a pale pink as he repeated his vows, and his eyes were solemn. I knew he meant every word he said, and I had no doubt he'd live up to them.

Next, it was time for the rings. I hadn't realized how sweaty my palms had become, and I had to resist the urge to wipe them on my skirt before Owen took the ring from the pastor and slid it onto my finger. It took him a couple of tries to get the ring onto my finger, his hands shook so badly. I gave him an encouraging smile, but then it was my turn, and I found that I was shaking, too. I held his hand steady with my left hand so I could get the ring onto his finger. Once that was over with, I felt weak with relief.

The pastor declared us husband and wife and told Owen to kiss me. I couldn't help but grin at the wave of red that rose from his collar. Kissing in public really wasn't in his comfort zone. Kissing while our friends and family cheered us on was a little freaky, now that I thought about it. The kiss ended up being a bit stiff and awkward, but I figured we had a lifetime to practice on getting it

right, and I knew it would go much, much better when we were alone. We hadn't really had problems in that area before.

Something brushed my hair, and I jolted, but then realized it was only the magical flower petals that were supposed to fall at this point in the ceremony. Only when I was sure that it was just the petals and no scythes or snares did I relax and enjoy the sight that looked like a snowfall showering our guests. We made our way down the aisle under the falling petals, which clung to Owen's hair and my veil.

Rina's team did their thing, and soon the cathedral in the woods had become a forest glade. I was glad my friends had made me snack during the day because it was a long time before I got to eat anything. I was so busy being congratulated and greeted by all the guests. I finally got to sit down when Rod got up to give the toast. "I feel like I've been there for every step of this relationship," he said. "Even before they met. Owen knew Katie was the girl for him the first time he set eyes on her. He just took his time actually talking to her, and then he took his time spending any time with her once they did talk, and then he took his time asking her out. But I guess when you already know you're meant for each other, there's no rush. And besides, they had plenty of other stuff to deal with. That bit of excitement earlier? All in a day's work for these two. I'd have been worried if nothing had happened. So, to Katie and Owen. May you always find joy amid the chaos."

We cut the cake and posed for a lot of pictures before the band began playing and the dancing started. They played a slow, dreamy number for our first dance, and I was glad Rod had drilled us, though I wished I'd practiced this in a long dress, as well. "You're doing fine," Owen murmured into my ear.

"Maybe we should have taken lessons," I replied.

"And we would have fit them in when? We were a little busy saving the magical world."

"Oh, yeah. Story of our lives, huh?"

"Good save there, noticing the danger. If you hadn't . . ." He shuddered, and I squeezed his shoulder.

"Yeah, it could have been ugly."

"I doubt they'll let her out again. Even Jabez Jones should be convinced by now."

I was a little surprised by how many people came onto the dance floor once the guests were invited to join us. At most of the weddings I'd attended, people hung back. "You didn't, did you?" I said, giving him a stern look as the dance floor filled with couples.

"No! I totally forgot about it, actually. I never got around to finalizing the spell. And it looks like we don't need it."

Nita and Jake whirled past. He looked a little like a deer caught in

the headlights, but he didn't seem to object to her enthusiasm. Philip and Gemma moved gracefully together, and I wondered how long it would be before they took the next step. Rod looked uncharacteristically solemn as he danced with Marcia, and that made me suspect he was possibly considering settling down.

"So, Mrs. Palmer," Owen said with a grin, and I returned my focus to him.

"Yes, Mr. Palmer?"

"How long do you think we have to hang around here? I booked us a suite at the Plaza, and I can have the limo here in about fifteen minutes after I make a call."

A shiver went down my spine at the look in his eyes. "I'm ready when you are," I said.

We danced until the song ended, then left the dance floor. Our quick escape didn't happen very quickly, though, since we were greeted by more well-wishers. Some of our friends claimed dances with us, and next thing I knew, it was at least an hour later, but it was fun, and nothing had blown up, which was nice. I was refreshing myself with a cup of punch after a vigorous dance with Jake when Sam swooped down and landed on the table. "It turns out they did have something planned for during the wedding," he reported. "But we busted it up, no problem. Looks like we got all the ringleaders this time around, so I doubt we'll have to worry about this particular group again."

"That's nice to know," I said. "Maybe we'll actually get a honeymoon without a crisis."

"Well, if you wanna get out of here now, I can get you some drivers."

I remembered the drivers Sam had provided in the past and decided I didn't want to go on my honeymoon driven by a team of wacky gargoyles. Flying carpets were also out of the question. "No, thanks. Owen has something booked." At least, I hoped that the limo Owen had mentioned wasn't driven by Rocky and Rollo.

Finally, the party seemed to be winding down, and Owen called for our car. I threw my bouquet, and Marcia caught it. Rod went a little pale, but he stayed by her side and when I winked at him, he winked back. I'd actually been aiming for Gemma, but fate must have kicked in. We ran for the door under yet another shower of flower petals, which I expected, and when we darted out from under the awning we ran into a shower of sparks, which I didn't expect. My first instinct was to slap at my skirt to make sure it didn't catch fire, but they seemed to be magical sparks. I looked up to see a portly figure draped in layers of clothing hovering nearby, sparks spraying from the end of her wand.

“Best wishes to you on this joyous occasion,” said Ethelinda, my fairy godmother. “I never seem to fail to bring about happy endings.”

“Thanks,” I said, even though she’d had nothing to do with it.

“Oh, but this chariot of yours is so drab,” she said when our limo pulled up. “Let me just turn it into a golden carriage for you.”

“No!” both Owen and I cried out. We’d never get to the Plaza from here in a horsedrawn carriage. And, knowing how Ethelinda’s romantic schemes usually went, I wasn’t even sure the carriage wouldn’t turn into a pumpkin by the time we got there. “We’re good,” I added. “I mean, we’re together and married, so your work here is done.”

“Well, in that case . . .” She waved her wand and vanished, much to my relief.

The limo driver opened the door for us, and I crawled inside and collapsed gratefully against the seat. Once we were moving, we had another kiss, one that was a lot nicer and less formal than the one in the wedding. “I guess this is happily ever after,” I said with a sigh.

“The start of it, at any rate,” he said, and then he kissed me again.

Acknowledgments

And so ends the Enchanted, Inc. series, at least for now. I may return to these characters or this world someday, but they need to rest and move on with their lives, and so do I. I first came up with this idea in early 2002 and wrote the first draft of the first book in late 2003, so I've been living in this universe for a long time. When I started writing that first book, I don't think I even imagined that I'd end up writing nine books or that I'd still be writing this series nearly sixteen years later.

So many people have had a hand in making this series what it became. My agent, Kristin Nelson, has been with it from the start, ever since she responded to my initial query for the first book. Allison Dickens, then at Ballantine Books, was the editor who bought the first books and brought them to the world. Signe Pike took over to get the next two books published. Martha Trachtenberg has been the copyeditor on most of the series. Nina Berkson provided the now-iconic cover art.

I owe special thanks to the Japanese readers and my Japanese publisher, Tokyo Sogensha, for allowing the series to continue beyond four books. When the U.S. publisher decided to end the series, Japan wasn't ready to give up and asked for more books. That meant I had already written more books when independent publishing became a viable option. I don't know if I would have written more books without that encouragement.

And thanks to all the readers over the years who've fallen in love with these books and these characters. The first books are still in print and selling steadily after all these years, which is a good sign that readers are still telling other people about them and new readers are discovering them.

I hope you'll follow me on more magical adventures in new worlds and with new people, and I may still revisit the world of Magic, Spells, and Illusions, Inc. In the meantime, I hope you all enjoy many magical moments.

About the Author

SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She also writes the steampunk fantasy Rebels series and the contemporary fantasy Fairy Tale series. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

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